THE CURTAIN THAT WALKS

A Novella of Radical Joy

a novella by

Surjan

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Foreword

It is a rare thing to be handed a book that insists, from its first yellow page, that you are allowed to be happy. Not happy later, not happy once the work is finished and the worry is folded away, but happy now, in the middle of the unfinished day. This is that book.

I first met Surjan's work the way most people meet weather — by walking out into it. There was a drawing pinned to a studio wall: a colossal yellow curtain hanging over a city, and beneath its scalloped hem a thin bright band of life, so small you had to lean in, so alive you forgot to lean back out. I stood there longer than was polite. When I finally turned around, the ordinary room had become a little more possible than it had been before.

That is the whole trick of Surjan, if a generosity this large can be called a trick. The buildings are alive here. They speak to one another across avenues. They lift and lower a curtain the size of a feeling and put on a play that never ends and is never the same twice. And walking the length of the island, threading the cables, oiling the track, sweeping the mirror-pool clean each morning, is a child — the curtain-keeper — who is the reader's age, whatever age the reader happens to be.

Everyone in these pages is genderqueer and non-binary, including the author, and I want to say plainly why that matters to the joy and is not merely decoration on it. A city that has decided its architecture is alive has already decided that the categories were never the point. The point was always the aliveness. The point was always whether the thing in front of you — a tower, a person, a curtain — is permitted to be exactly and abundantly itself, and to be loved for it, out loud, in yellow. Surjan's Manhattan has decided yes. So has Surjan. So, by the last plate, have I.

Read this slowly if you can. Read it to someone. Read it on a grey day especially, because that is the day it was built for. The curtain is already moving up the island as you open the cover. It would be a shame to miss the scene it is about to lift its hem upon — which is, of course, the one you are standing in.

I have read the manuscript four times now, and each time a different stop has undone me, which is how I know it is alive. The first time it was the tall ones bowing; I had not expected a book of such determined joy to understand loneliness so exactly, and the image of the dignified tower leaning down forty floors to hear a child stayed with me for weeks. The second time it was the flower wall at Grand Central, and its secret of stations — that you are not a vessel that empties when it gives but a channel that flows — which is the truest thing I have read about the cost and the not-cost of generosity in many years, in or out of fiction. The third time, the round ones at Central Park South. The fourth time, the small thing the keeper says at the very end, directly to the reader, about the grey morning; but I

will not spoil it; you will arrive there yourself, and it will, I suspect, be waiting for whatever you happen to be carrying that day.

What I want to prepare you for, before you begin, is the book's central and deceptively simple claim, because everything else rests on it and it is easy to read past on the first page. The claim is this: that the joy was always already there. The curtain, the keeper insists again and again, adds nothing. It does not manufacture delight or import it from somewhere brighter. It only frames what is already true — holds an edge of attention around the joy that is already scattered through every neighborhood, going to waste for lack of a frame — and the framing is the whole of the magic, because a framed joy becomes visible, and a visible joy becomes shareable, and a shared joy becomes a song. This is not a book about a magical curtain that makes a sad city happy. It is a book about a city that was always capable of its own happiness and only needed to be taught to look. The distinction matters more than any other in these pages, and the author knows it, and builds the entire ascent of the island around it, stop by stop, until the finale makes it unmistakable.

— from the Foreword

Introduction

I should tell you how the curtain began, since people always ask, and since the true answer is better than the one they expect.

They expect me to say it began as a sketch, or a grief, or a grand idea about cities. It began as a piece of yellow. I had a square of paper the exact color of the inside of a lemon, and I held it up against the window one grey morning, and the whole grey morning behind it turned warm. Nothing about the morning had changed. Only that I had put something yellow between myself and it, and chosen to look through the yellow. That is the entire philosophy of this book, and I have spent a year and a great deal of glass and steel and rendered light saying it more slowly.

So here is what I built, and how, because I believe in telling you how the magic is done. Every image in this book I conceived, modeled in three dimensions, and rendered myself. I built the curtain in Rhino, panel by panel, until it hung the way a real curtain hangs — heavy at the hem, breathing at the top. I built the track it travels on. I built the tiny cast, the balloon-creatures and the lantern-clusters and the alphabet of small red letters, and I lit them and let them cast their small honest shadows into the mirror-pool. None of the pictures were made by a machine dreaming on my behalf. They were made by me, on purpose, for you.

The words are a different matter, and I want to be honest about that too. The words I wrote in conversation — with an artificial intelligence as my co-author, the way one writes with a patient friend who never tires and never takes the pen entirely. I am the author. The voice is mine, the cast is mine, the city is mine, the insistence on joy is very much mine. But the labor of sentences was shared, and it would be a small lie of pride to pretend otherwise. I am the creator of the context. That is the role I claim, and it is enough.

Now, the curtain itself. It is not a building. This confuses people who want it to stay still. It travels. It rides a single long track up the spine of Manhattan, from the Battery to the Great Lawn, and at each stop it pauses, and lifts its scalloped hem, and the neighborhood it has stopped in wakes up and performs. The buildings are the performers. They have been waiting, some of them for a hundred years, for a stage and a permission, and the curtain brings both. The play has no script and no ending. It is improvised nightly by the architecture and witnessed by whoever happens to be alive nearby, which is everyone.

And I am in it, small, near the bottom of every plate, with my broom and my ring of keys. I keep the curtain. I do not own it — you cannot own a thing that large and that happy — but I oil the track and untangle the cables and sweep the mirror-pool, and in exchange I get to ride the whole length of the island inside the best secret there is, which is that the city is glad to be here. That gladness is the play. This book is the catalogue of one full performance, one

walk from the harbor to the green, fourteen stops, fourteen scenes, one curtain, one keeper, and a whole island of radical joy. Come up the track with me. Mind the cables. Here is the first stop.

Let me say a little more about the cast, since they will be your companions for the length of the island and you deserve a proper introduction. They are not characters in the usual sense; they do not have names or backstories or arcs; they are shapes, mostly — the pink one with the round surprised face, the green one always halfway through a sentence, the small red letters that spell nothing, the two white circles that travel together. I made them this way on purpose. I wanted a cast that could not be reduced to explanation, that you would come to love not for what they had been through or what they wanted but simply for how they are, the way you love the particular shapes of the people you love long before and long after you could say anything useful about their histories. The cast is an alphabet of gladness. Each one is a single letter of it. Together they spell things the keeper feels and cannot otherwise say.

And let me say, because I have been asked and will be asked again, why everyone in this book — the keeper, the cast, the wakened buildings, and I, the author — is genderqueer and non-binary, and why I have not made this a source of conflict or struggle anywhere in the story, when stories about people like us so often turn on exactly that struggle. I left the struggle out on purpose. Not because it is not real — it is real, I have lived it, many of us have — but because I wanted, for the length of one yellow book, to build a world where it had already been won, so completely that it had soaked down into the architecture, into the curtain, into the light itself. A world where being exactly and abundantly yourself is so thoroughly assumed that no one in the entire city would think to remark on it, any more than they would remark on the buildings being alive. I wanted to give us, for once, not a story about earning the right to exist, but a story that simply begins after that right is settled, and goes on to the next thing, which is joy. The radical part of radical joy, for people like us, is sometimes just being allowed to skip to the joy.

— Surjan

The Novella

The Yellow Curtain

fourteen stops, from the Battery to the Great Lawn

1. The Curtain Wakes

THE BATTERY

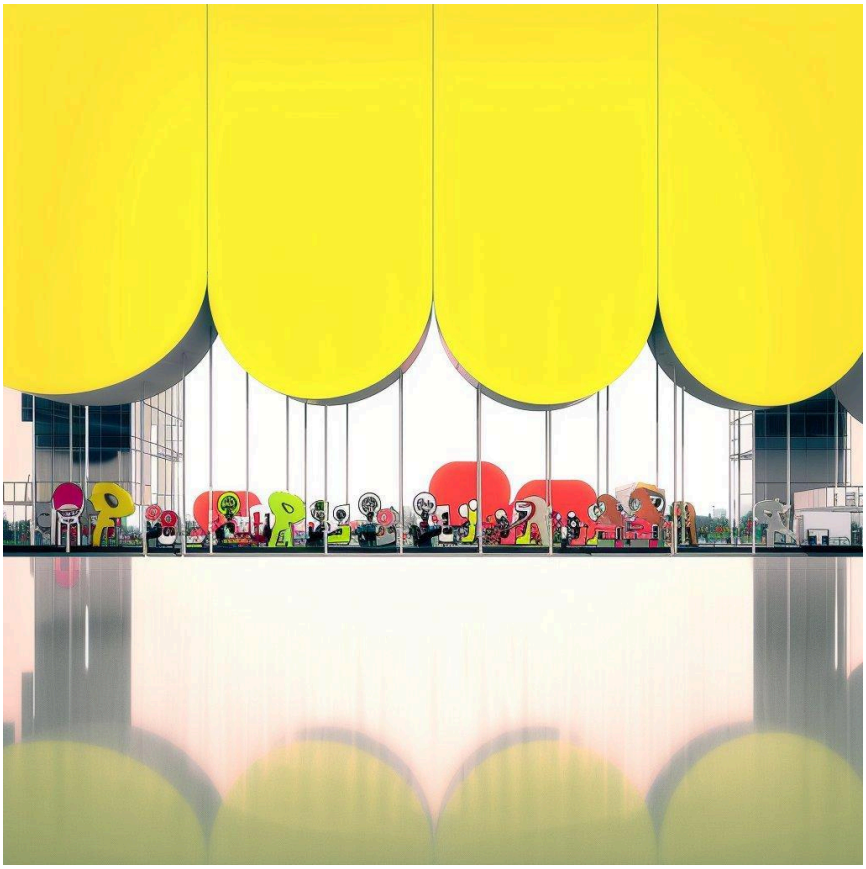

Plate 1

The curtain sleeps at the bottom of the island, in the green at the Battery where the land runs out and the water begins, and that is where I wake it. I have done this every morning for as long as I can remember being a keeper, and I do it the same way each time, because the curtain is enormous and old and kind, and enormous old kind things like to be woken the same way. I walk out along the track with my broom over my shoulder. I knock three times on the lowest panel, which is the color of a school bus and twice as tall as the tallest thing you have ever knocked on. I say good morning. And then I wait.

Waiting is part of it. People think the magic is in the knocking, but the magic is in the waiting, in the small grey moment after you have asked a large thing to wake and before it decides to. The harbor is silver at that hour. The gulls are conducting their small unimportant arguments over nothing, the way they do, the way I love. The water slaps the seawall in no particular rhythm. And the curtain hangs there, vast and still, the way a sail hangs before the wind has made up its mind, and I stand at its hem with my heart doing the

thing it does every single morning, which is to wonder, just for a breath, whether today is the day it will not wake at all.

It always wakes. I want to tell you that plainly, because I do not want you to spend this whole book afraid. In all my mornings it has never once failed to wake. But I want you to know about the breath of wondering, because the breath of wondering is what makes the waking matter. If you were certain, every morning, that the enormous kind thing would wake, you would stop saying good morning to it. You would stop knocking. You would walk past it the way the city walks past everything it has decided to be certain of, and the curtain would feel that, and one morning, out of sheer loneliness, it really might not wake. So I keep the breath of wondering. It is the rent I pay.

And then it wakes. The hem shivers first, the way your own skin shivers when a good idea arrives, when someone says a true thing you were not ready for, when the music does the part you have been waiting the whole song for. The shiver runs the length of the lowest panel and up into the great body of the yellow, and the curtain lifts itself a hand's width off the grass — just a hand's width, no more, that is all it takes — and underneath, in the bright thin band between the hem and the ground, the whole cast is revealed, already awake, already leaning toward the day like a row of sunflowers that heard the sun come up before it did.

There they are, all in a row beneath the yellow. I love them so much I have to look at them one at a time or it is too much at once. The little red letters that spell nothing and mean everything, leaning shoulder to shoulder. The pink one with the round surprised face who looks, every morning, as though the morning is the first morning there has ever been. The green one who is always halfway through a sentence and never minds being interrupted because there is always more sentence where that came from. The orange round-bellied one. The two small white circles that travel everywhere together and have never, in all my mornings, been apart. Someone has set out the day's lanterns already. Someone is tuning a drum, testing it with one knuckle, frowning, testing it again.

They see me. They always see me. And they do the thing they do, which I have tried a hundred times to describe and will try once more for you: they lift their small arms, all of them at once, in a gesture that is not quite a wave and not quite applause and is not quite reaching and is really just the physical shape of being glad that another one of us has arrived. If you have ever walked into a room and had everyone in it look up and be visibly, uncomplicatedly happy that the person who walked in was you — then you know the gesture, and you know that most people go years between such rooms, and you know what it would do to a person to receive that gesture every single morning of their life. It has made me brave. That is what it has done. A person who is met like that each morning can do almost anything by afternoon.

“Where today,” asks the pink one, who asks this every morning and loves the answer every morning as if it were brand new, because to the pink one it is brand new; the pink one keeps nothing overnight but its own gladness, and wakes each day an empty bright bowl waiting to be filled.

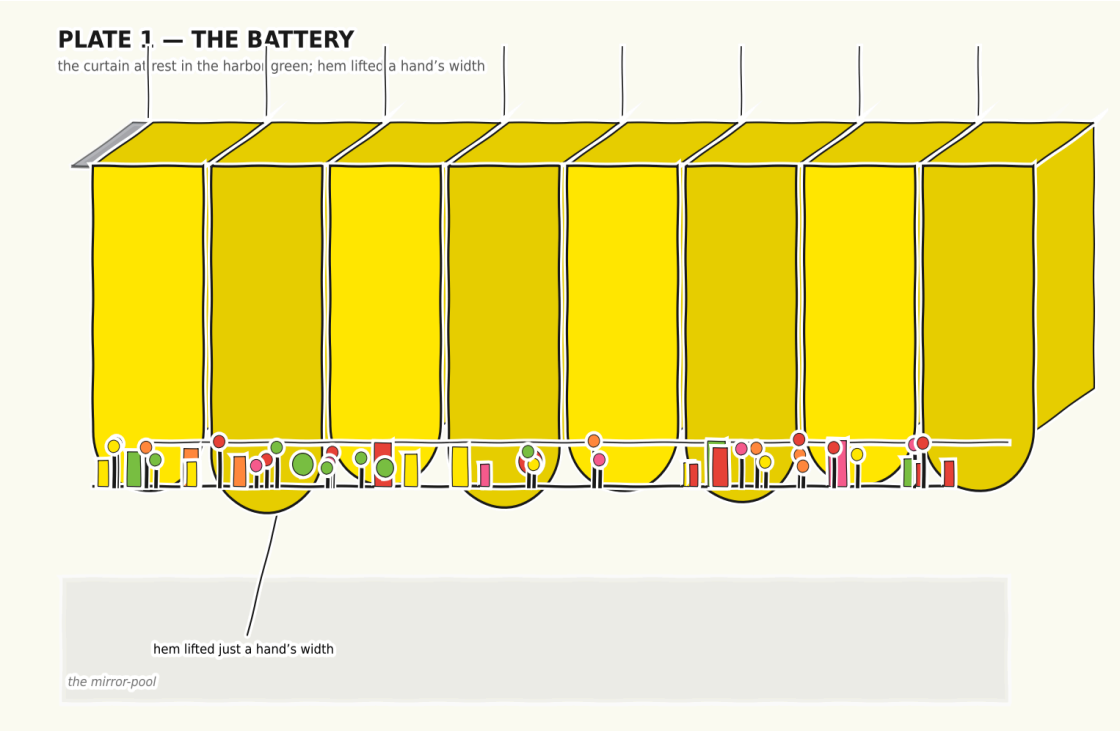
PLATE 1 — THE BATTERY
the curtain at rest in the harbor green; hem lifted a hand's width
hem lifted just a hand's width
the mirror-pool

Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at The Battery

“Up,” I say. “All the way up. Battery to the green. The whole island, the long way, the way that takes all day.”

And the cast makes the sound they make for that, which I cannot spell, but which you have made yourself, on the morning of a trip you have wanted for a long time, when someone older and trusted finally says yes, we are going, get your shoes, it is today. It is a sound with running in it. It is a sound with the whole unspent day folded up inside it like a sail. The green one starts a sentence about it and does not finish. The two white circles spin once around each other. The drum, finally tuned, says one round confident note, and the note hangs in the silver morning and does not fade so much as walk off up the island ahead of us, scouting.

Here is a thing I have learned about beginnings, standing at this hem on all these mornings. A beginning is not the moment something starts. A beginning is the moment everyone agrees to start together. The curtain was awake. The cast was awake. I was awake, broom on my shoulder, keys on my belt. But we did not begin until the pink one asked and I answered and the cast made the running sound — until all of us, at once, turned and faced

the same long day. That is the beginning. You can be awake for hours and not have begun. Most of the city, at this hour, is awake and has not begun. They are waiting, though they would not say so, for someone to ask where today, and someone else to say up, all the way up. I get to be both, most mornings. It is the best job on the island.

The curtain settles its hem back down over the cast, gently, the way you tuck a secret in for safekeeping, the way you fold a blanket back over someone who is not done sleeping but is about to be. Not to hide them — to carry them. The whole point of the hem is that it can carry the bright band of life from stop to stop without spilling it, and lift again at the next neighborhood with everyone still in their places, still leaning toward the day. I check the track. I oil the one wheel that always wants oiling, the third from the front, which has wanted oiling since before I was keeper and will want it after. I coil the loose cable. I take one last look at the harbor, silver and arguing and full of the particular light that only the bottom of the island gets, the light that comes off the water twice, once down and once back up.

I have not told you my name, and I am not going to, and I want to explain why, because it is not a secret and it is not a game. I do not tell you my name because the keeper is not a who so much as a what — a role, a doing, a standing-at-the-hem-each-morning — and a role does better without a name pinning it to one body. There have been keepers before me. There will be keepers after. We do not look alike; we are not the same age or the same kind; the only thing we share is the broom and the keys and the knocking and the breath of wondering. If I told you my name you might think the keeper had to be me, this particular one, and then when I am gone you might think the keeping stopped. It does not stop. The name that matters is the curtain's, and the curtain's name is the whole book, and you are reading it.

People ask me, too, whether I get lonely, a child traveling all day with a curtain and a cast of shapes, and the honest answer is that I did not understand the question for a long time, because the cast is the least lonely company there is. The pink one with the round surprised face does not make conversation the way people make conversation, full of weather and complaint and the careful trading of small unimportant facts. The pink one simply asks where today and is glad of the answer. The green one starts sentences and abandons them like a generous host who has put out far more food than anyone can eat. The two white circles travel together and ask nothing of me at all. It is the easiest company in the world, the company of the cast, because none of them want me to be anything other than the keeper, and the keeper is the one thing I already am, all the way down, with nothing left over to perform.

And then the track hums. You feel it before you hear it, in the soles of your feet, a low glad note that is the curtain's own version of the cast's running sound. We begin to move.

Behind us the harbor keeps its silver and its gulls and its arguing, and it is not sad to see us go, because the harbor knows we come back; we always come back; the bottom of the island is where the curtain sleeps and you always return to where you sleep. But ahead — ahead the whole grey morning of the city is waiting to be looked at through yellow, and you already know, you have known since the first page, what that does to a grey morning. It does not change the morning. It changes the looking. And the looking, it turns out, was always the part we could change. Mind the cables. Here is the first stop, which is the second thing, because the Battery was the waking and the waking is never counted. Up we go.

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2. The Tall Ones Bow

WALL STREET

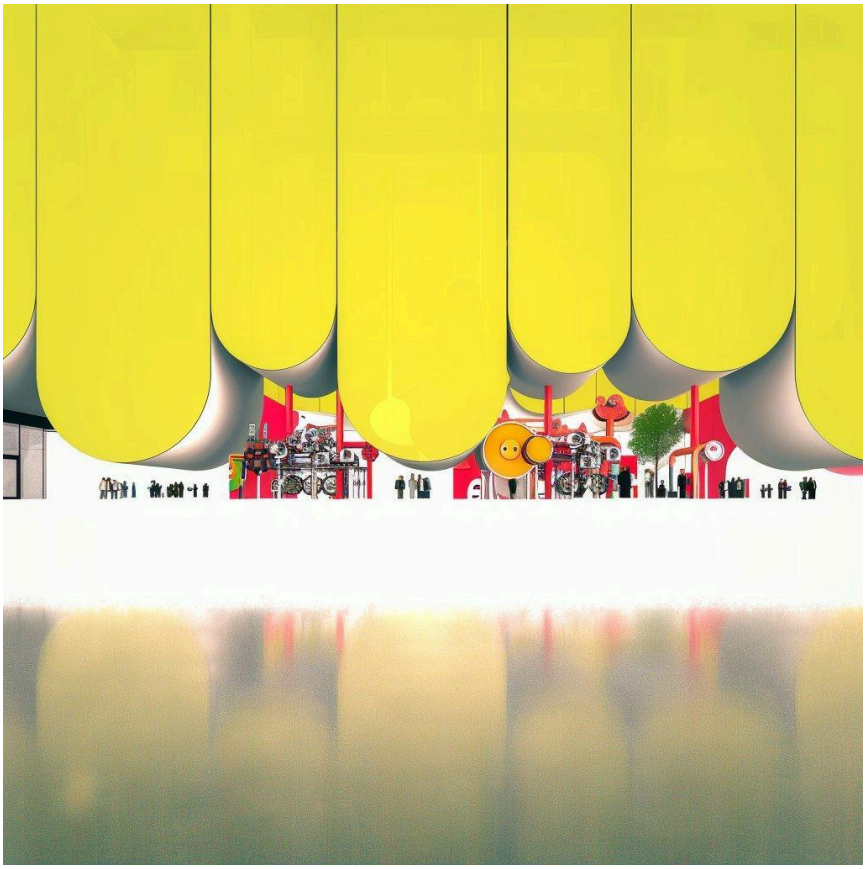


Plate 2

The first true stop is among the tall serious ones, the towers of Wall Street, who have a reputation, well earned, for never bending. They are very tall and very narrow and they were built by people who believed that money was a kind of weather you could survive only by standing up perfectly straight and never, ever flinching. For a hundred years the tall ones have stood up straight and not flinched. It has made them magnificent. It has also made them lonely, in the specific way that things which never flinch are lonely, because nobody embraces a thing that is braced, and the tall ones have been braced for a century.

The track carries us into the canyon between them, and the light changes the way it always changes here — goes narrow and grey and vertical, sliced into long cold strips by all that standing-straight stone. The cast feels it. I feel them feel it. The green one stops mid-sentence for once. The pink one's round face goes from surprised to something quieter. Even the drum holds its note. We have been to Wall Street before, of course — the route is always the same route — but you never quite get used to the cold strips of light, and I would worry about a keeper who did.

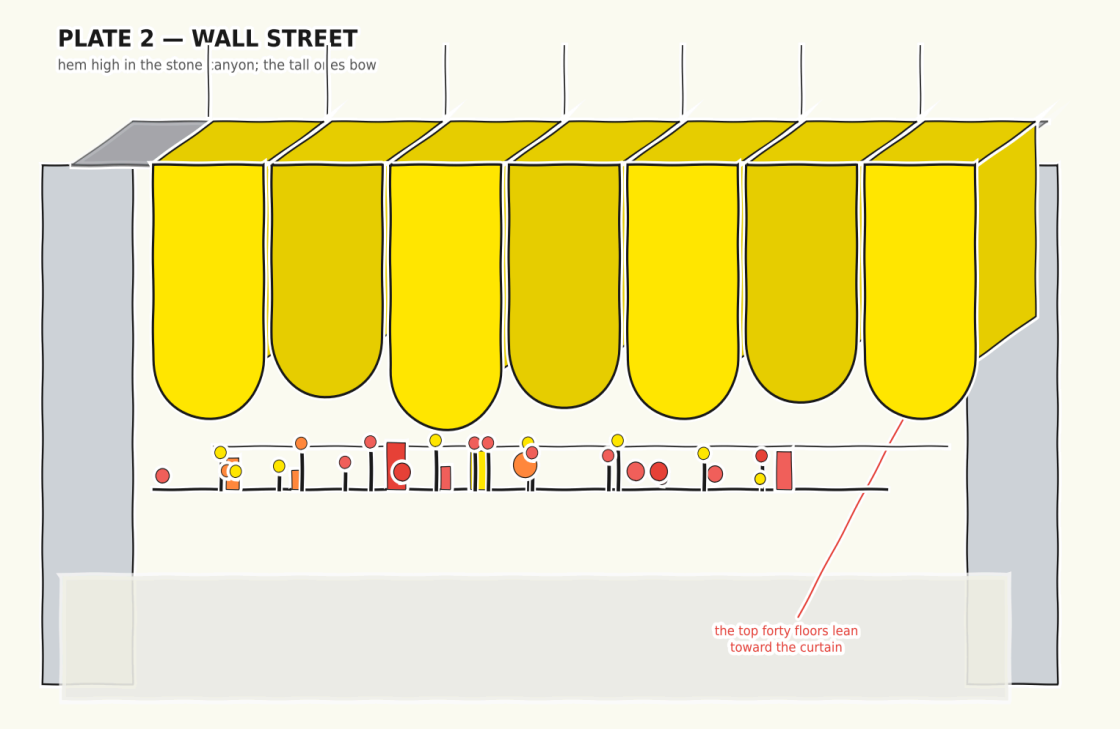
The curtain stops in the canyon and I hold my breath, the morning's second breath of wondering, because I never know with the serious ones. Some mornings they are not ready. Some mornings the curtain lifts its hem and the tall ones simply stand there, braced, unable to remember how to be anything but braced, and we wait a while and then move on and try again another day, and that is all right, that is allowed, you cannot rush a hundred years. But this morning, when the hem lifts — high here, much higher than at the Battery, the curtain seems to know the tall ones need room — this morning something is different. This morning they have been waiting for us.

Underneath the high hem the cast tumbles out small and impossibly bright against all that grey stone. The machines with their cheerful round gauges go rolling across the plaza. The little crowds in their dark coats — the real people, the morning commuters, who do not see the curtain the way I see it but feel it the way everyone feels it, as a sudden inexplicable lift in an ordinary Tuesday — the little crowds slow down. And a single orange disc rolls out from under the hem on its edge, all the way across the plaza, wobbling, gathering speed, and comes to rest spinning at the very foot of the tallest tower, like a coin that has thought it over and decided to be a sun instead.

And then the tall one does the thing it has not done in a hundred years. It bows.

Not far. It is not built to bend far; the people who made it made sure of that. But the top forty floors of the tallest tower lean, just perceptibly, just enough that you would see it if you were watching, toward the curtain and the small spinning orange sun at its foot — the way a very dignified elder, who has not bent down in years and whose joints have long since decided bending is for other people, leans down anyway, slowly, with great care, to hear what a small child is trying to tell them. The whole canyon seems to inhale. I have seen the curtain do a great many things to a great many buildings. I have never seen anything like the tall one bowing. It costs it something. You can see that it costs it something. That is what makes it the most beautiful thing on the block.

“We did not know we were allowed,” says the tall one, in the low voice that tall buildings have, the voice you feel in the soles of your feet before you hear it in your ears, the same place you felt the track hum. “All this time. We thought standing straight was the whole of it. We thought if we bent even once, even a little, we would lose the thing that made us worth building. We have been so careful. We have been careful for a hundred years.”



Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at Wall Street

"You were always allowed," I tell it, and I say it gently, because a hundred years of being careful is not undone by being told it was unnecessary; that only makes it worse; that only adds the grief of wasted carefulness on top of the carefulness. So I do not say it was unnecessary. I say: "You were always allowed. You were just never asked. There is a difference. Standing straight kept you up. That was real work and it mattered and you did it well. But nobody ever came and asked you to bow, and a thing will not do, on its own, the thing nobody has asked it to do, however much it longs to. You were not wrong to wait to be asked. You were only waiting. The curtain came to ask. That is the whole of what the curtain is for."

The orange disc spins at the tower's foot, showing off now, wobbling in tight bright circles, and the tower watches it the way you watch something young and free that is not at all worried about weather, that has never once considered that the sky might fall and has therefore left itself entirely available for delight — and something in the grey stone, some clenched thing forty floors up that has been clenched since the building was a drawing, unclenches. I feel it unclench. The whole canyon feels warmer by a degree that no instrument would measure but every coat on the plaza loosens by one button.

The little crowds look up. This is my favorite part of this stop, and I watch for it every time. The commuters in their dark coats have walked past this tower ten thousand times, headphones in, eyes down, walking the walk of people who have decided the city is certain and therefore not worth looking at. They have never once seen it bow. And now, because the

orange sun is spinning and the curtain is up and the morning has lifted in a way they cannot name, they look up — and they catch it. The lean. The bow. They put their hands over their mouths, not in fear, in the other thing, the thing you do when you witness dignity discovering delight, when you see a serious person laugh for the first time, when the strict teacher turns out to dance. One of them, a young one, sits right down on the cold plaza steps and just looks up, coat and all, briefcase forgotten, and does not move for a long time, and I love that one especially, and I hope they were not too late for wherever the dark coat was taking them, and I suspect they no longer cared.

"What do I do now," the tower asks me, and there is something almost shy in the great low voice, the shyness of an elder who has just done a new thing in public and is not sure of the etiquette. "Now that I have bowed. Do I — do I stand back up? Do I stay like this? I do not know the rules for after the bowing."

"There are no rules for after," I say. "That is the whole secret of after. You stay as bent or as straight as feels true, and you change it whenever you like, and nobody is keeping score, least of all the curtain. You could stand all the way back up tomorrow and that would be fine. You could stay bent forever and that would be fine. You could bow a little to one building and straight to another. The point was never the bow. The point was that you can. That you were always able to, and now you know it, and knowing it, you are free, which is a heavier and better thing than standing straight ever was."

The tall one considers this. You can feel it considering, all hundred years and forty floors of it, turning the new freedom over the way you turn a key you have just been given to a door you did not know was yours. And then it does the bravest thing of the whole morning: it stays bent. It chooses to stay bent, here, in the canyon, in front of the other tall ones who have not yet been asked and who are watching their tallest sibling with an expression I can only call hope. The orange sun spins. The crowds sit on the steps. The curtain holds the scene a long, long moment, longer than at any stop so far, because the curtain knows that the other tall ones are watching and learning that bowing is survivable, that you can bend and not break, that the weather of money is not the only weather and perhaps never was.

Then we move on. We have twelve stops to go and a whole island to wake and the day, though long, is not infinite. But I look back, the way I always look back, and the tallest tower is still bent, still leaning into the space where the orange sun was, and one of the other tall ones — the second tallest, the one that has stood straightest longest — is leaning too, just barely, just beginning, just trying it. They will not fully straighten again, I think. I do not think they want to. And the next time a young one in a dark coat walks through that canyon with their eyes down and their certainty up, the tall ones will be bent above them, waiting, ready, and maybe that one too will look up. That is how it spreads. Not all at once. One bow

at a time, one looking-up at a time, one ordinary Tuesday at a time, until the whole cold canyon has learned to lean.

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3. The Cast-Iron Children

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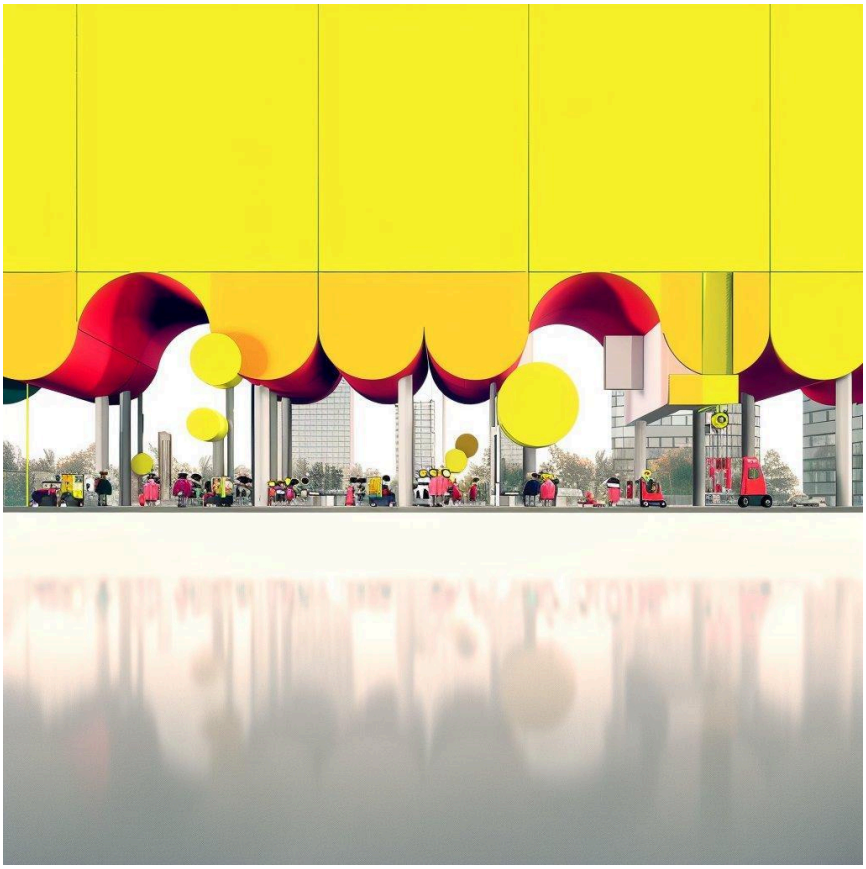


Plate 3

Tribeca is where the buildings are made of cast iron painted the colors of candy — deep cherry red, butter yellow, the white of the inside of an almond — and they are old, older than the tall ones in some cases, but they have the temperaments of children, and I have thought a long time about why, and here is what I have decided. Cast iron remembers being poured. It remembers being hot and liquid and able to become any shape at all, a railing or a column or a curl or a star, and it never quite gets over the disappointment of having to cool down and hold one shape forever. So it stays a little molten on the inside. It stays ready to become something else. And readiness to become something else, in a building or a person, is the truest definition of childhood I know.

So when the curtain lifts its hem here — and it lifts it in waves at this stop, the hem rising and dipping and rising again, scalloped like the edge of a shell, because the cast-iron ones cannot bear a straight line and the curtain indulges them — when the hem lifts, the buildings practically fall out into the scene. They do not wait to be asked the way the tall ones waited. They have been pressed against the inside of the hem all the way up from the

Battery, jostling, whispering, and the moment there is room they come tumbling. The red ones roll forward on their rounded bottoms like weighted toys that always come back upright no matter how hard you push them, which is, when you think about it, the single most hopeful piece of engineering ever devised: a thing built so that falling over is only ever temporary.

The yellow discs spin. There are figures in pink among them, and figures pushing small bright carts piled with I-have-never-been-sure-what, and the whole stop has the exact quality of a recess that the grown buildings have been waiting all century to be let out into. You know the feeling. The bell rings and the door opens and the held-in day comes pouring out onto the blacktop, and for fifteen minutes the rules are different, and the fifteen minutes are worth the whole rest of the day. Tribeca is fifteen minutes of recess that has learned how to last.

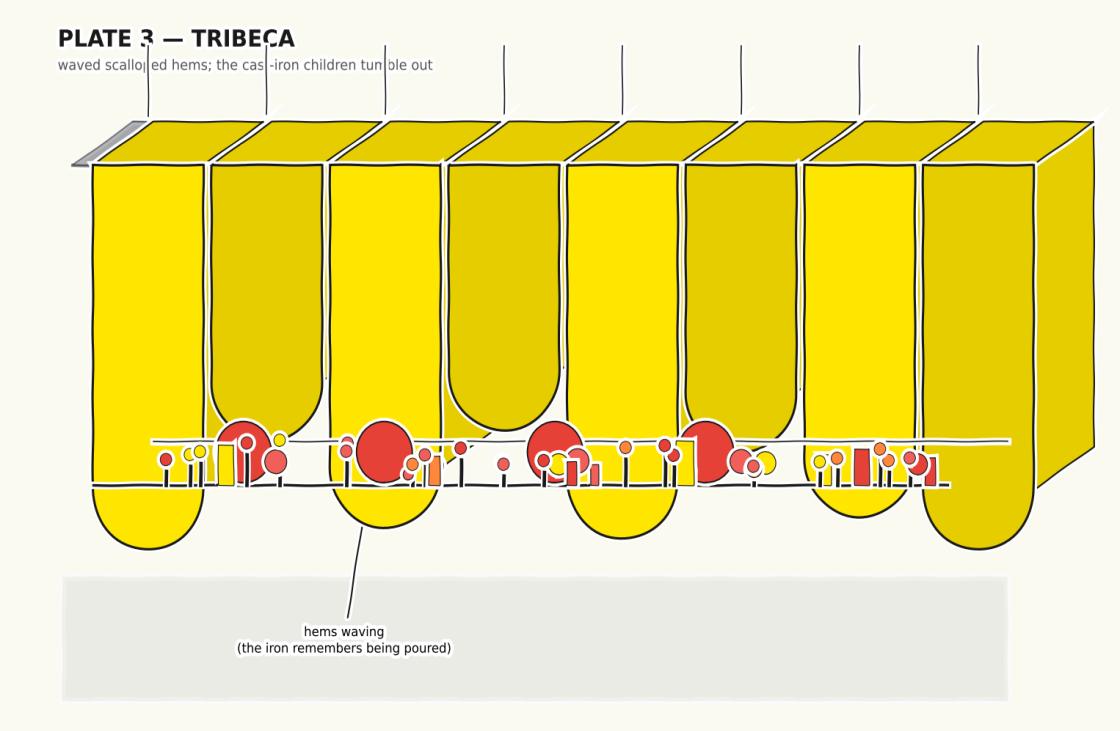
"Watch this, watch this," says a cherry-red building, and it does a thing with its cornice — a sort of flourish, a sort of tip, a sort of controlled topple — that is either showing off or falling over, and honestly even the building does not seem certain which, and that uncertainty is the joke, and the other buildings laugh, and the laugh of cast-iron buildings sounds like a hundred windows being thrown open at once on the first warm day of the year, that clatter and bang and rush of air.

"I saw," I tell it. "That was a good one. Do another."

And it does another, and the others do their own, a whole block of century-old cast-iron buildings showing off for a child with a broom, and I clap, and the cast claps, the little red letters and the pink one and the green one all clapping their small hands, and the buildings glow under the clapping the way only a show-off glows when the showing-off has actually landed. There is no shame here. That is the gift of this stop. The tall ones carried a hundred years of careful dignity; the cast-iron children carry nothing at all but the wish to be watched while they play, and the discovery — which they make fresh every single morning, having kept nothing overnight, like the pink one — that being watched while you play is the very best thing there is, better even than the playing, better than being praised for being good, because it asks nothing of you except that you keep being exactly as alive as you already are.

I have a soft spot for this stop. I will admit it. The tall ones move me and the lantern stop later will undo me entirely, but Tribeca is where I am happiest, because the cast-iron children are not trying to teach anyone anything. They are not bowing like the tall ones, learning a hard lesson about permission. They are not remembering hard things like the square will remember further up. They simply want to play, and to be seen playing, and they have arranged an entire neighborhood around that single uncomplicated want, and the arrangement works, and has worked for a hundred years, and will work for a hundred more.

There is a kind of wisdom that looks exactly like not needing any wisdom at all. The cast-iron children have it.



Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at Tribeca

A small one comes and stands beside me. It is no taller than a real child, no taller than me, and it is the deep wet red of the inside of a watermelon, and it does not roll or spin or show off. It just comes and stands close, the way children stand close to the one person in a loud bright room they have decided is safe — not touching, not talking, just near, just inside the warm radius of the safe person — and it watches the others play. And I let it. I do not tell it to go join in. I know that some of us, at recess, are players, and some of us are standers-near, and the standers-near are not broken players; they are having their own kind of recess, the kind that happens an arm's length from the noise, and it is just as good, and it must not be corrected.

"You do not have to play," I tell the small red one, quietly, just for the two of us. "You can just stand here. Standing here is also a way of being at the party. I do it all the time. Look — I am doing it right now, with you."

The small red one does not answer. But it leans, very slightly, the smallest possible lean, against my side, the way the tall one leaned forty floors up, the same gesture scaled all the way down to the size of a child made of watermelon-colored iron, and we stand together and watch the others play, and I understand that the lean is the answer, the lean is the whole answer, the lean is the most that some of us can say and it says everything.

The curtain, very kindly, does not move on. It feels the small red one leaning against me and it understands, the way it understands everything, and it holds the scene — the rolling reds, the spinning yellows, the show-off with its cornice, the clapping cast — and it does not move us along until the small red one is ready, which takes a while, because joy this size takes a while to be ready to leave, and the whole entire point of the curtain, the thing that makes it different from every other way of moving through a city, is that we have all day. We are not late for anything. There is nowhere we are supposed to be except exactly here, watching cast-iron children play, until the standers-near among us have had their fill of standing near.

I should say more about the rolling, because the rolling is the whole philosophy of Tribeca and I passed over it too quickly. A thing built to roll back upright — a weighted toy, a round-bottomed building, a cast-iron child — has made a particular peace with falling that the tall ones never could. The tall ones cannot afford to fall; a tall straight thing that falls is finished, broken on the ground, and so the tall ones spend everything they have on never falling, and that is why they are so lonely, because never-falling is a full-time job that leaves no time for anything else. But the cast-iron children fall constantly. They fall as a form of play. They tip themselves over on purpose to feel the good certain swing of coming back up, and falling holds no terror for them at all, because their whole design is the promise that down is only ever temporary. I think this is the deepest thing iron remembers from being poured: that it was liquid once, that it found a shape, and that finding a shape after being formless is proof, permanent proof, that you can always come back up from the floor.

The watermelon-red small one taught me something else, standing near, that I did not learn until later turning it over. There is a difference between a child who cannot play and a child who is choosing, for now, to watch. The world is forever trying to fix the watchers — to send them in, to make them join, to treat the standing-near as a problem to be solved with encouragement. But the watcher is not broken. The watcher is gathering. The watcher is doing the necessary private work of deciding, at their own pace, that the bright loud thing is safe to enter, and that work cannot be rushed and must not be shamed, and a keeper who tries to hurry a watcher into the game has understood nothing about how courage actually arrives. Courage does not arrive by being pushed. It arrives by being given time and a safe warm side to lean against while the watcher does the gathering. Then, when it is ready and not one moment before, it rolls itself in.

Eventually the small red one straightens. It has had enough; it is full; you can see the fullness in it the way you can see it in a child who has watched the recess and is, at last, content. It looks up at me. It still does not say anything. But it rolls — just once, just a little, an experimental quarter-turn on its rounded bottom — toward the others, and then looks back at me to see if that was all right, if standers-near are allowed to become players, and I nod, because of course they are, that is the other secret, the secret the standers-near most

need to know: that you can change your mind, that the arm's length from the noise is not a sentence, that whenever you are ready the playing will still be there and the players will make room. It rolls in. They make room. The curtain, satisfied, hums the track awake, and we go, and I am, as I am every time I leave Tribeca, the particular kind of happy that has a small ache in it, the ache of having watched something become brave at its own pace and on its own terms, which is the only pace and the only terms that bravery ever comes on.

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4. The Doodle That Got Loose

SOHO

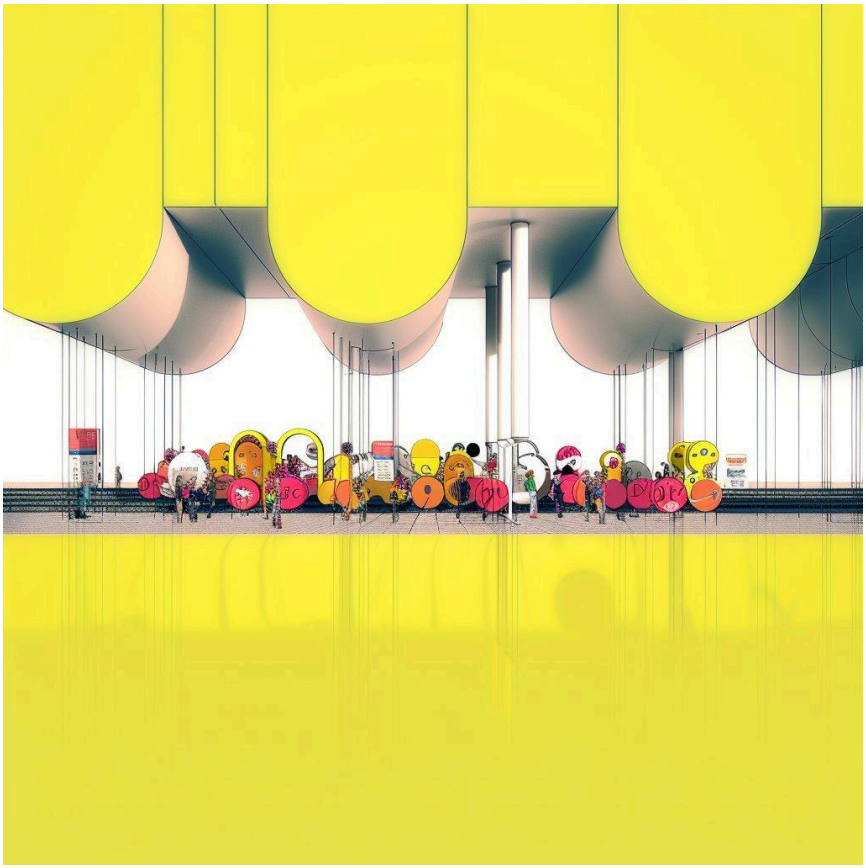


Plate 4

In SoHo the architecture has gone completely to drawing. I do not know how else to say it, and I have tried, on the walk between Tribeca and here, to find a better way to say it, and I cannot. When the hem lifts in SoHo the scene underneath is not made of buildings exactly, not even cast-iron ones, but of lines — looping, doubling, scribbling, backtracking lines in red and yellow and ink-black, as if someone with a very happy pen and absolutely no intention of staying inside any outline had been let loose on the entire block and had drawn until the block was more drawing than building, more gesture than thing.

And the cast here, the cast that travels with the curtain, is joined at this stop by a second cast, a native cast, the doodles that got loose. A whole crowd of them, packed wall to wall, every single one a different invented creature. This one is all loops, a thing made entirely of the cursive you do in the margin when you are on hold. This one is a face inside a circle, nothing more, two dots and a curve, and it is somehow one of the most expressive faces I have ever met. This one is purely a squiggle that has decided it is alive and is, I want to be clear, completely correct in that decision; it is as alive as I am; aliveness was never about

having the right parts. They are jammed together joyfully under the yellow, wall to wall, the densest crowd on the whole route, like the best party you were ever crammed into, the kind where you cannot move and do not want to and end up having the conversation of your life with whoever you happen to be pressed against.

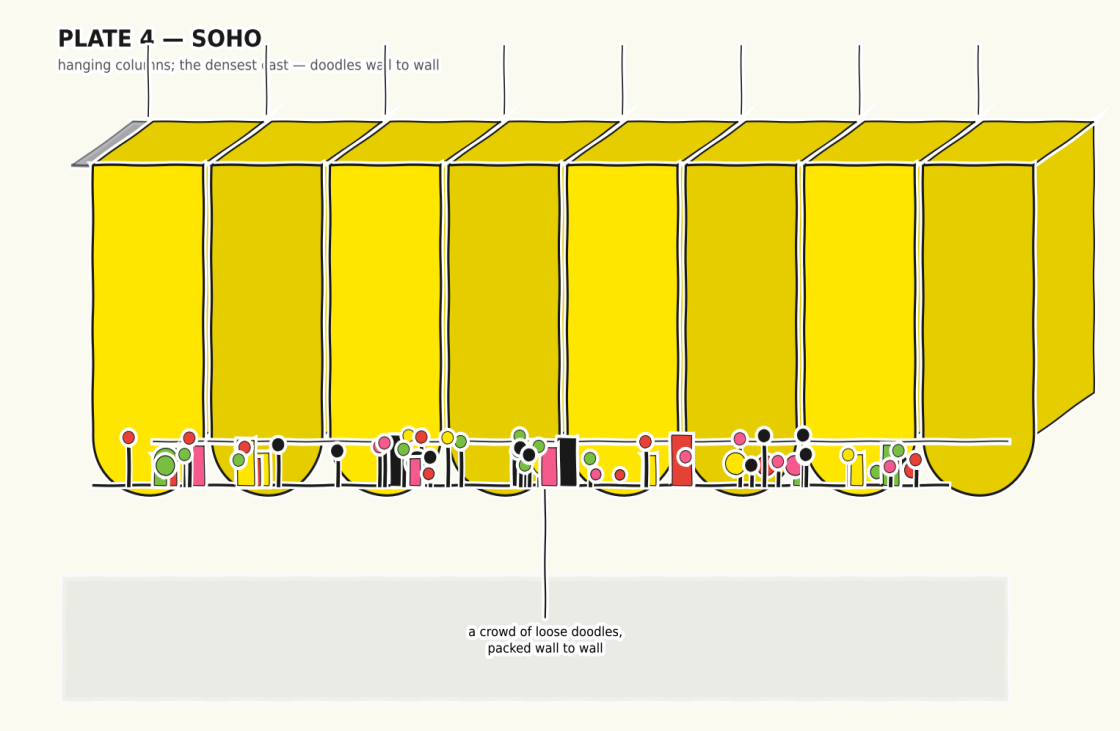
"Are we too much," asks a doodle, who is mostly elbows and enthusiasm and a single enormous eye. It asks it the way you ask a question you have been carrying a long time, lightly, as if it were not heavy, which is exactly how you can tell that it is. "We have always wondered. People used to look at us — back when we were just marks in the margins of their notebooks, just the things their pens did when their minds wandered somewhere better than the meeting — people used to look at us and say, that is too much, that is excessive, that is not how the thing is supposed to be drawn. And then they would turn the page. Are they right? Are we too much?"

"There is no such thing," I say, and I do not say it lightly back; I say it the way you answer a heavy question once you have felt its weight, slowly, so it lands. "Listen to me, because this is true and I need you to keep it. There is no such thing as too much of yourself. You cannot be too much of yourself. That is just called being finished. A thing that is fully itself looks like too much only to someone who wanted less of it, and wanting less of you is their condition, not yours. The pens that drew you in the margins — their minds wandered to you because you were the most alive thing on the page, more alive than the meeting, more alive than the notes. They did not draw you because they were bored. They drew you because some part of them was trying to escape toward exactly your kind of aliveness, and then the rest of them got scared of how much they wanted it, and called it too much, and turned the page. The turning of the page was fear. It was never a verdict on you. You were never too much. You were just more than they were ready to want."

The doodle considers this. You can see it considering, because the loops that make it up slow down, almost stop, hang there — and then speed back up, brighter, faster, the ink in them suddenly darker and more certain. And then it does something that undoes me a little. It adds a flourish to itself. A small extra curl, right at the top, that it did not have a moment ago — a new loop, a thought it has just decided to keep, a piece of more-of-itself that it is choosing, now, on purpose, in front of everyone, having just been told that more-of-itself is not a crime but a completion.

And the whole crowd of doodles sees it. And the whole crowd cheers — a sound like a thousand pens all scribbling at once, joyful and scratchy and fast — and then they all do it. Every doodle in the packed bright crowd adds a flourish, a curl, a loop, an extra eye, a longer tail, a second squiggle branching off the first. The block briefly becomes illegible with joy. You could not read it now if you tried; there is too much line, too much gesture, too much yes; an entire neighborhood writing itself larger and louder and more, in real time, because

one of them asked the heavy question lightly and got an answer that let it put the question down.



Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at SoHo

“Won't it get crowded,” the first doodle asks me, a little drunk on its own new curl, gesturing at the swelling illegible glory of the block. “If we all keep adding to ourselves. Won't we run out of room?”

“The room grows,” I tell it, and I believe this, I have watched it happen, it is one of the truest things the route has taught me. “That is the thing nobody believes until they see it. When one of you becomes more fully itself, it does not take up room the others needed. It makes room. It shows the others that the room was always bigger than they thought, that the edges they were cramming themselves inside of were drawn in pencil and can be erased. You are not competing for a fixed amount of space. You are teaching each other that the space was never fixed. Look — look how much more room there is now than when we arrived, and not one of you has left, and all of you are larger. That is not crowding. That is the opposite of crowding. That is what a place looks like when everyone in it has stopped apologizing for the size of their own aliveness.”

The curtain laughs its yellow laugh — I can feel it laughing, the whole great body of it shaking very gently, the way you shake when something is too delightful to hold still through — and the doodles laugh, and the traveling cast laughs, and the pink one's round face is so happy it has gone past surprised all the way to a kind of stunned, and the green

one starts a sentence about it and for once does not need to finish because the whole block is the finish of the sentence. We could stay here forever. I mean that more at this stop than at any other; SoHo is the stop I am most tempted to simply never leave, to set down my broom among the loose doodles and become a loose doodle myself, all loops and a single enormous eye, too much and finished and unafraid.

There is a thing about being called too much that I did not say to the doodle, because the doodle was not ready to hear it and you only give a creature the part of the truth it can carry. But I will say it to you, since you are reading and can put the book down if it is too much, which it is not. The people who call you too much are almost always telling you, without knowing it, the exact size of the room they have built inside themselves. Too much for what? Too much for the room they have. And the room they have is small not because rooms must be small but because they built it small, long ago, probably to keep something out, probably for reasons that were real at the time. Their small room is not your fault and not your responsibility and — this is the part that takes a lifetime — not your measure. You are not too big. Their room is small. Those are different sentences with different subjects, and almost everyone, told they are too much, hears the first sentence when the truth is always the second.

And here is what the doodles do that people could learn from, if people could learn from doodles, which they can, I have seen it. When one doodle added a flourish to itself and was cheered rather than shrunk, the others did not feel crowded by it. They felt permitted. That is the entire difference between a room that is small and a room that is growing: in the small room, someone else's flourish is a threat, a taking-up of space you needed; in the growing room, someone else's flourish is a permission slip, a demonstration that the adding-to-yourself is survivable and even celebrated. The doodles live in a growing room. They make the room grow by each refusing to be the one who shrinks. You could do this too, with the people you love. You could be the one who adds a flourish and survives it visibly, so the others learn that they can. Someone has to go first. In SoHo, that morning, it was a doodle made mostly of elbows. It is always someone made mostly of elbows who goes first. The elegant ones wait to see if it is safe.

But we have ten stops to go, and a keeper who stays is no longer a keeper, and the doodles do not need me to stay; that is the point; I have given them the thing and the thing is theirs now and will not unhappen when I leave. So I pick up my broom. The first doodle, the one with the new curl, loops itself once around me — not a hug exactly, doodles do not have arms, but a kind of encircling, a drawn line that goes all the way around the safe person and closes — and then lets go, and I step back onto the track, and the curtain lowers its hem over both casts, the traveling and the native, carrying the traveling one on and leaving the native one behind larger than we found it. The track hums. We go. Behind us SoHo is illegible with joy and will, I am fairly sure, stay that way, because you cannot un-know that

you were never too much, and a neighborhood that has learned it writes itself larger every single day after, forever, world without margins, amen.

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5. The Arches Learn to Sing

GREENWICH VILLAGE

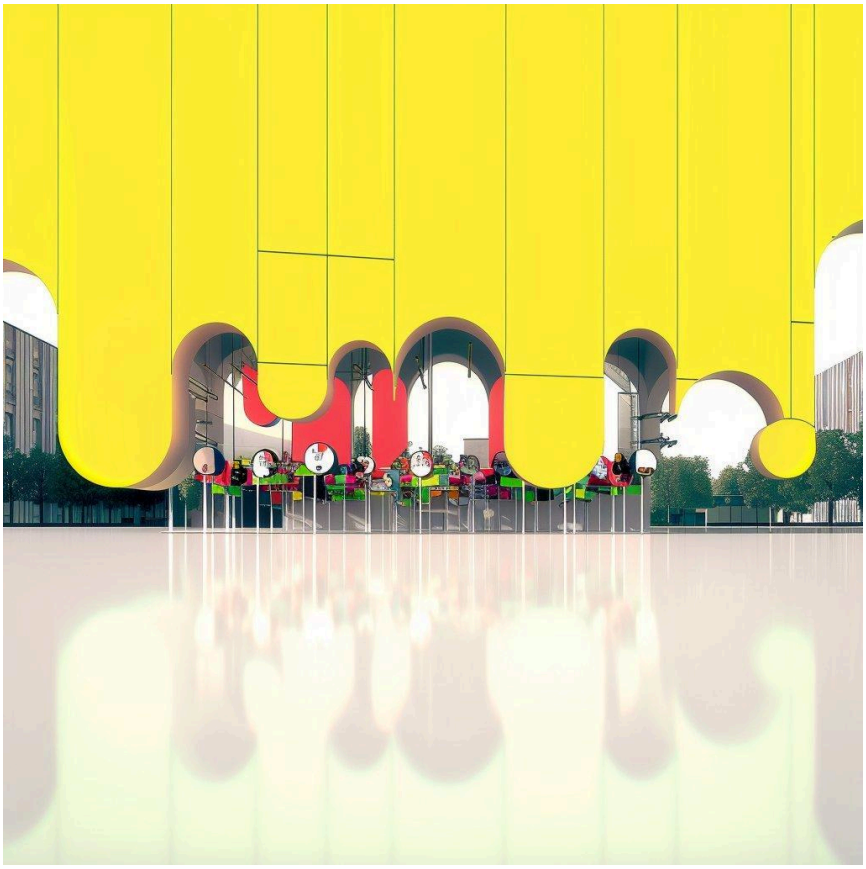


Plate 5

The Village is built low and crooked and kind, and its streets do not obey the grid — they wander, they cross themselves, they change their names halfway down and double back and end where you did not expect — and so the curtain does not hang straight here either. It cannot. The Village would not stand for a straight curtain. Instead the hem sags and loops between the low buildings in soft yellow scallops, dipping down to nearly touch a rooftop and then rising again, dipping and rising, so that the hem itself becomes a row of arches, and under each separate arch a separate small scene is framed, like the windows in a calendar of good days, like a row of little stages each set for a different play.

Under the arches the cast — ours, and the Village's own — has set up something between a market and a band and a conversation that has been going on so long nobody remembers starting it. There is green everywhere, the green of new things, of pea shoots and lime peel and the first leaves, and red among the green, and the little figures are arranged in clusters under the separate arches, and here is the miracle of this stop, the thing I bring people to

the Village specifically to understand: each cluster is making a different sound, and the sounds do not clash.

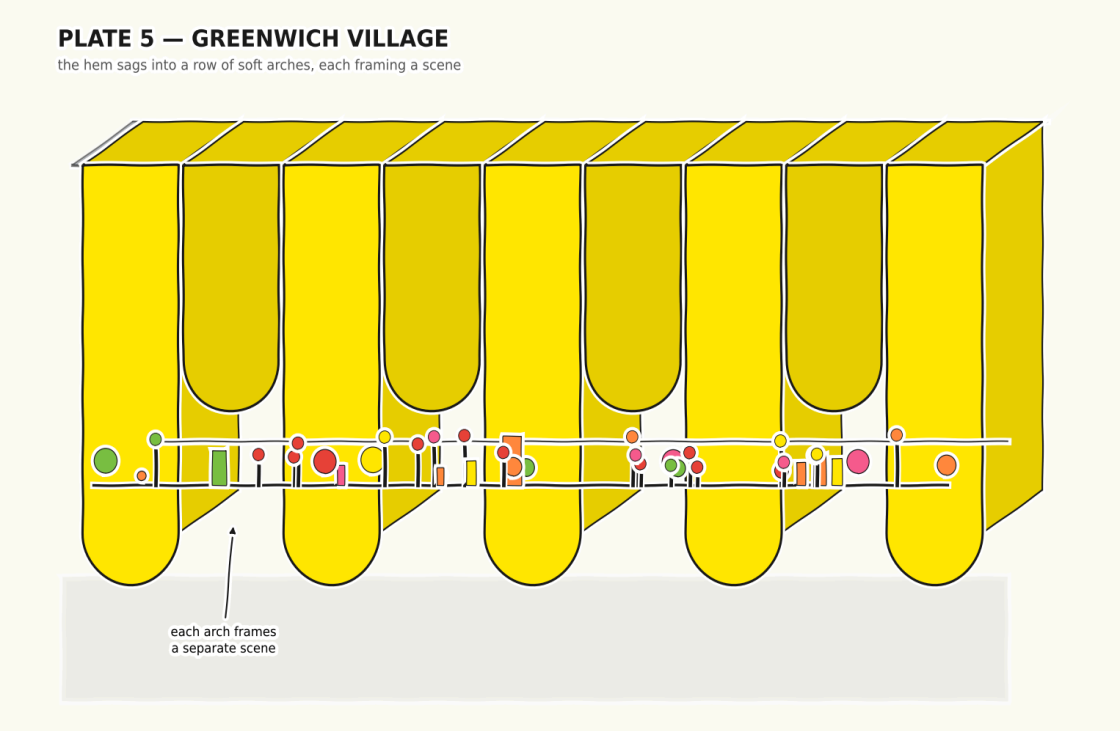
In most of the city the sounds clash. You know this. You live in it, or somewhere like it. The fruit-seller's call cuts across the busker's chord which is drowned by the bus which is arguing with the car which is interrupted by the jackhammer, and it is all just noise, a grey wall of noise, and you put in your headphones to build a smaller kinder wall against the big unkind one. But here, under the looping yellow, under the row of arches — the fruit-seller's call and the busker's chord and the argument about nothing in particular and the baby's first experiments with the surprising fact of its own voice all arrive at the ear already arranged. Already sorted. Already a song. As if the arches themselves were tuning the neighborhood as its noise passed up through them, catching each sound and setting it gently in its place, so that what reaches you is not the wall but the music the wall was always secretly made of.

"We were always making this song," says the largest arch, in a voice that is itself a little musical, surprised at itself, the way you are surprised the first time you hear a recording of yourself singing and it is better than you feared. "All this time. The whole Village, every day, all the calling and chording and arguing and the babies finding their voices — we were always making this exact song. We just could not hear it. It was too close. We were inside it. You cannot hear the song you are inside of until something frames an edge around it and hands it back to you from a half-step away."

And that, I think, sitting down under the middle arch to listen, is what the curtain does. More than the bowing it teaches the tall ones, more than the permission it gives the doodles — underneath all of it, this is the curtain's one true trick, and it is not really a trick at all. The curtain does not add the joy. I want to be careful to say this exactly right, because it is the center of everything. The joy was already there. It was always already there, in the tall ones and the cast-iron children and the loose doodles and the calling Village, scattered and clashing and going to waste for lack of a frame. The curtain only frames it. It holds a yellow edge around what is already happening and says: here. This. Look at this. And the instant a thing is framed it becomes unmistakable, and a moment after that it becomes unforgettable, and a moment after that it becomes yours, to keep, to carry, to take home into the grey and hold up against the window on a hard morning.

I sit under the middle arch a long while and let the framed song wash through me. It is in no hurry; neither am I; the curtain, as ever, has given us all day. The song is made of: a bell on a shop door. A skateboard's rumble and the particular silence after it stops. Someone practicing scales through an open third-floor window, missing the same note each time, missing it more tenderly each time. Two old friends disagreeing about a film with the deep contentment of people who have disagreed about everything for fifty years and consider it the foundation of the friendship. A dog with opinions. The baby, again, delighted again, as if

its voice were a toy it keeps rediscovering in the bottom of the box. None of it was composed. All of it is a composition. That is the Village, framed.



Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at Greenwich Village

A figure the green of a new pea pod comes and sits beside me under the middle arch and, without being asked, without a word, breaks its sandwich in half and gives me the larger half. This too is the Village; this is the Village's own native verse in the larger song; the unasked half-sandwich, the kindness that does not announce itself or wait to be deserved. I take it. You always take it; refusing it would be refusing the song. We eat under the arch and listen to the neighborhood be unknowingly beautiful, and the green figure hums along to a tune that has no fixed melody and somehow hums it correctly anyway, because in the Village there is no wrong way to hum the song; the song is large enough to be right however you come at it.

“Will it last,” the green figure asks me, around a mouthful of sandwich, gesturing with its chin at the whole framed singing scene. “After you go. After the curtain takes the frame away to the next stop. Does the Village go back to being just noise?”

“Here is the strange part,” I say. “It does and it doesn't. The frame leaves, yes. The yellow edge moves up the island with me. And tomorrow the calling and chording and arguing will sound, to most ears, like noise again, the way it did before we came. But not to every ear. Because someone — maybe the busker, maybe the baby's tired parent, maybe one of the two old friends — someone heard the song just now, while the frame was up, and you cannot

un-hear the song you are inside of once you have heard it from a half-step away. They will carry the half-step with them now. They will hear the song in the noise from the inside, which is harder, which is rarer, which is the whole of what it means to love a place. The frame teaches a few ears in each neighborhood to hear from the inside. And a few ears is enough. A few ears, in each place, keep the song going long after the yellow has moved on."

There is a craft to the framing that the arches do, and I have tried to learn it, standing under the middle arch all those mornings, because if the curtain is teaching the island to frame its own joy then the keeper had better understand the framing well enough to teach it after the yellow is gone. And here is what I have worked out about how the arches turn noise into song. They do not silence anything. That is the first thing, and the thing everyone gets wrong, reaching for headphones, building the smaller kinder wall against the bigger one. The arches do not subtract a single sound. The fruit-seller still calls; the bus still groans; the argument about nothing still rises and falls. Nothing is removed. The framing is entirely additive: the arches add an edge of attention, a held boundary of listening, and inside that boundary the very same sounds that were noise become, without changing at all, music. The transformation is not in the sounds. It is in the listening. And listening, unlike the sounds, is a thing you control.

Which means — and this is the part that kept me under the arch long after the green figure had finished its half of the sandwich — which means that anyone can do it, anywhere, without a single arch, because the arch was never really the thing. The arch was a teacher of the listening. The real instrument is the attention, and everyone is already carrying one of those, has been carrying it the whole time, usually switched off, usually aimed at the wall and told to hear noise. You can switch it on. You can aim it at the same unchanged street and decide to hear the song the street is always secretly making. It is hard, much harder than putting in headphones, because the headphones do the work for you and the attention you must do yourself. But it is the difference between defending yourself against a place and loving it, and the Village, of all the neighborhoods, is the one that most rewards being loved that way, being heard from the inside, framed by your own switched-on attention into the long unhurried song it has been singing under its crooked kind low roofs the entire time.

The green figure thinks about this, finishes its half, and nods, satisfied, the way the cast-iron child nodded, the way the doodle's loops sped up. And then it does the Village thing once more, the closing thing: it pats the stone of the arch beside it, fondly, the way you pat the flank of an animal you are grateful to, and the arch — I swear this — the arch leans very slightly into the pat, the same lean, the tall one's lean, the small red child's lean, the universal lean of a thing that has been touched kindly and wants to say so without words. Everything on this island leans, once you have framed it long enough to see. We get up. I am humming. I cannot get the framed song out of my head and I am not trying to, and that, I have decided, is the entire difference between a song that is stuck and a song that is kept — a

stuck song you are trying to be rid of, and a kept song you are carrying on purpose, and they can be the very same notes, and the only thing that differs is whether you have decided to be glad of them. I have decided. We climb back onto the track. Nine stops to go, and the whole Village singing behind us, and a few new ears in it now that will keep the song.

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6. The Square That Remembered

UNION SQUARE

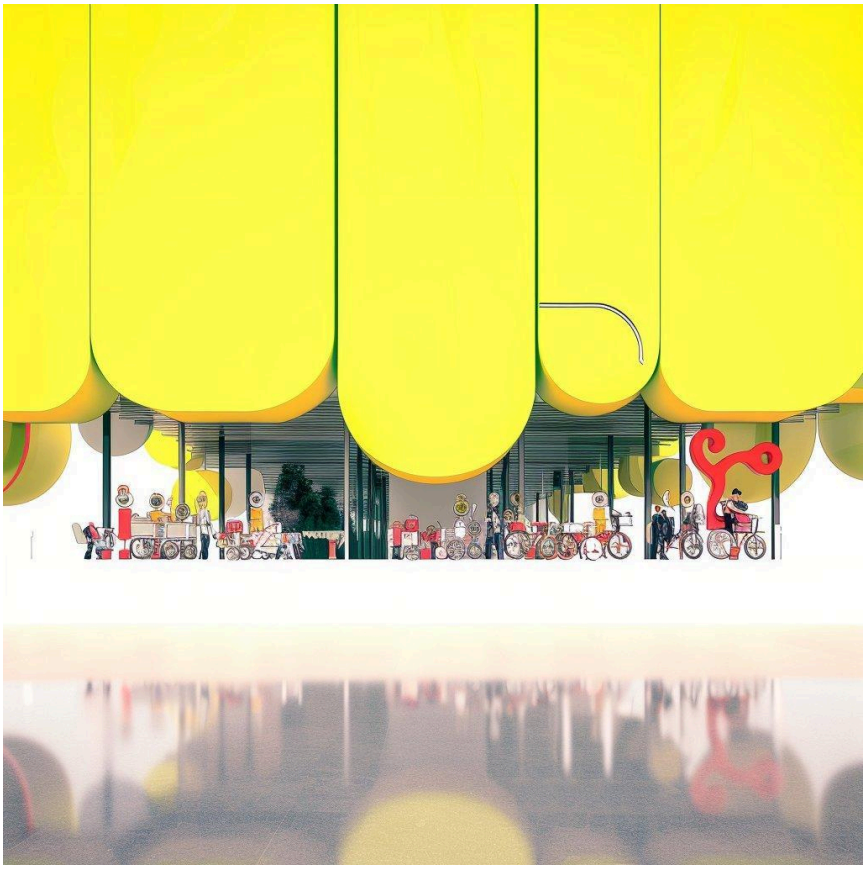


Plate 6

Union Square has always been the island's gathering place. For two centuries it has been the spot where people came to stand together when standing together was the only thing left to do — when there were no words good enough and no actions large enough and the only available comfort was the warm fact of other bodies, also frightened, also hopeful, also unwilling to be alone with it. Every march began or ended here. Every vigil found its way here, candles cupped against the wind. Every farmers' market, every first kiss on the south steps, every protest and every reunion and every ordinary lunch eaten on a bench in the sun. The square remembers all of it. It is a building made mostly of memory, and I have learned, on this route, that memory can be very heavy, heavier than stone, heavier than a hundred years of standing straight.

So when the curtain lifts its hem here — tall flat panels at this stop, dignified, the curtain seems to stand at a kind of attention for Union Square the way you stand differently in a place where important things have happened — when the hem lifts, I brace for the heaviness. I expect the square to show me its sorrows. They are right there; I can feel them;

two hundred years of candle-wax and chanting and grief pressed into the paving. I expect a sad stop. I have, some mornings, gotten one. The square is allowed its sad mornings; we all are; a keeper does not insist on joy from a place not ready to give it.

But this morning the square does something I am never quite ready for, however many times I see it. It brings out the bicycles.

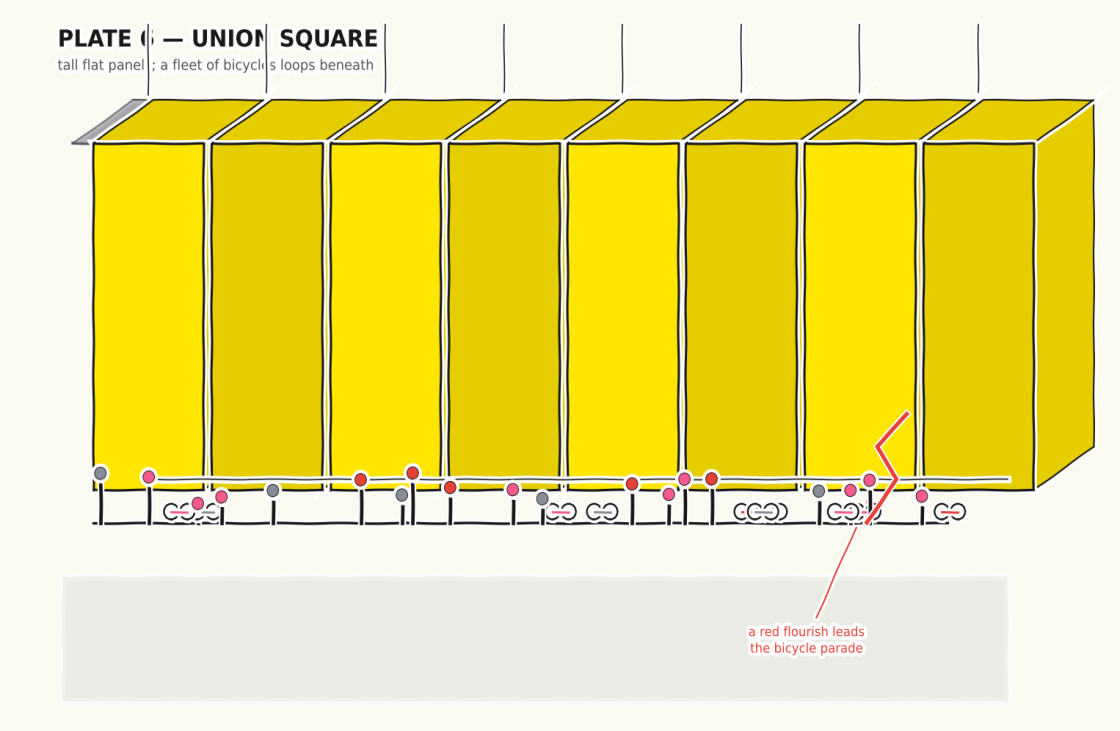
A whole bright fleet of them. Red-framed, silver-wheeled, ridden and pushed and walked and ringing their small bells — the cast wheeling them in great looping circles under the yellow, weaving, calling to one another, and leading the whole glorious procession a single curling red flourish of a thing, a shape like a question mark that has thought better of the question and decided to be a parade instead. They loop the square. They ring. And I understand, watching, what the square is telling me, and it is not what I braced for.

The square is not showing me its sorrows. It is showing me what the sorrows were for. All that gathering — all that standing together in the cold with candles, all those marches that began and ended here, all that grief held in common because it could not be held alone — it was practice. It was the square learning, slowly, over two centuries, the hardest and most important civic skill there is: how to be a place where people come together. And the square is showing me that the final exam of that long practice, the thing all the gathering was secretly for, is not more grief. It is this. The bicycles. The looping and the ringing and the going-somewhere-good together. The best use of a shared place, the square has decided, is not to stand still in it mourning, however necessary the mourning was. The best use is to move through it together, freely, bells ringing, on the way to a good thing, in company.

“I thought the heavy times were the important ones,” the square says, and its voice is the murmur of a thousand thousand footsteps gone gentle, the sound a place makes when it has been walked across by everyone for two hundred years and has loved every footstep. “I kept them so carefully. The marches. The vigils. The nights people came here because they had nowhere else to put what they were feeling. I thought those were the times that mattered, and the lunches and the kisses and the ordinary afternoons were just the spaces in between. I built my whole self around the heavy times. I am not sure I knew I was allowed to think the bicycles mattered too.”

“Keep the heavy times,” I tell it, because this is not a square you tell to let go; you do not tell a place that held a city's grief to simply set it down; that would be a cruelty dressed as comfort. “Keep every one of them. They did matter; they matter still; you were right to keep them and you must not throw them away. But look — look what they were practice for. You learned, in the heavy times, how to gather people. That skill does not only work for grief. It is the same skill, exactly the same, that lets you gather people for joy. The marches taught you the muscle. The bicycles are the muscle used for delight. You did not waste two hundred years on sorrow. You spent two hundred years learning to hold a crowd, and now you know

how, and a crowd can be held for anything, and you get to choose, from now on, what you hold them for.”



Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at Union Square

The bicycles loop and ring. A figure on the very smallest bike, a figure no bigger than a passing thought, rings its bell in a deliberate little rhythm — three short, one long — and the other bells hear it and answer, picking up the rhythm, passing it around the looping circle, and within a minute the whole square is chiming, all the small bells ringing the little figure's rhythm, the entire gathering place sounding suddenly like the inside of a clock that has decided to tell only good hours, that has fired the hands that pointed at the bad ones and kept only the chimes. The heaviness does not vanish. I want to be honest about that, because a book that promised you the heaviness would vanish would be lying to you, and this book does not lie to you. The grief is still there in the paving. But it has changed its job. It has become ballast. It has become the weight low in the hull that keeps all this brightness from simply floating up off the island and away, the way a thing with no history floats away, weightless and therefore unmoored. The square's two centuries of grief are exactly what let it hold this much joy without losing it to the wind. The heavy times are the keel.

“Oh,” says the square, and it is the same “oh” the tall tower said, the “oh” of a thing rearranging its whole understanding of itself in a single breath. “Oh. The heaviness is not the opposite of this. The heaviness is what holds this down.”

“That is the truest thing a gathering place can learn,” I tell it. “And you are the oldest gathering place on the island, so it is fitting that you are the one to learn it. The places that have never grieved cannot hold much joy; it floats right off them; you have seen it, the bright empty plazas where nothing has ever happened, where the joy never sticks. You are not one of those. You are heavy, and being heavy, you can carry an extraordinary amount of light.”

I have been to Union Square on its sad mornings too, and I owe you those, because a book that showed you only the bicycle mornings would be selling you a square that does not exist. On the sad mornings the curtain lifts its hem and the square simply cannot. The grief is too near the surface; some anniversary, some fresh wound in the city, some weight the paving cannot lighten that day; and the cast comes out subdued, and the bicycles stay wherever bicycles go when they are not wanted, and the square shows me, instead of looping joy, the candles. And I do not force it. That is the keeping. On the sad mornings I sweep the mirror-pool very quietly and I let the square grieve and I do not say a single word about bicycles, because the worst thing you can do to a place in grief is to insist on its joy before it is ready, to arrive with your bright frame and demand a performance of recovery. The square will come back to the bicycles. It always does. But it comes back in its own time, and the keeper's whole skill on the sad mornings is the skill of being present without insisting, of holding the frame loosely enough that grief can fill it instead of joy, because grief framed and witnessed is also a kind of music, lower and slower, and it too deserves to be heard rather than hurried.

The bicycles, when they do come, are not a denial of the candles. That is the thing I most want you to understand about Union Square, the thing that took me the longest to learn. The bright looping bicycle mornings are not the square pretending the grief never happened. They are the square having metabolized the grief so thoroughly that it can now power joy. The candles and the bicycles are the same energy in two different seasons. A square that had refused its grief, that had paved over the candles and insisted on bicycles from the start, would have hollow bicycles, joyless loops, the manic brightness of a place running from itself. Union Square's bicycles are not running from anything. They loop in full view of the remembered candles, and ring their bells in a place that knows exactly what it is to fall silent, and that is why the chiming goes all the way through you: it is joy that has been all the way down and chosen, knowingly, to come back up ringing.

We stay a long while. The bicycles loop. The bells chime the small figure's rhythm. The cast wheels and calls. And when at last the curtain hums the track awake and we begin to move, I look back — of course I look back — and the square is still chiming, lighter than it has been in two hundred years and not one single ounce less full, the grief and the bicycles riding together now, the keel and the sail, the heavy times holding down the bright ones, the whole square at last understanding that it was never choosing between remembering and rejoicing, that it could do both, that it had in fact been built, over two long centuries,

precisely so that it could do both at once. That is what the oldest places are for. Not to choose. To carry everything, all of it, the candle-wax and the bicycle bells, and to call the carrying joy.

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7. The Iron at the Crossroads

FLATIRON

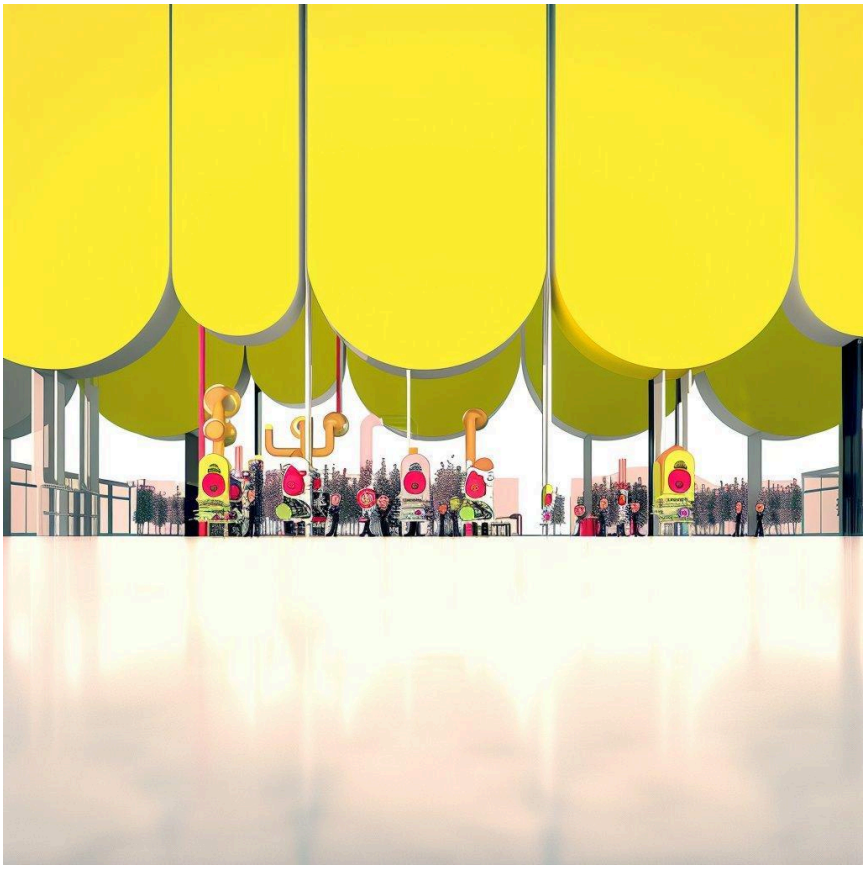


Plate 7

At the crossroads where Broadway breaks the rules and cuts diagonally across the obedient grid stands the building shaped like the prow of a ship — the thin one, the famous wedge, narrow as a wish at its leading edge, sailing north into an uptown it has never once reached and never will. It has spent its entire life sailing toward a destination it cannot arrive at, splitting the two avenues like water before a bow, and it is, I think, the most photographed lonely thing in the whole city. Everyone aims a camera at it. Everyone has a picture of it. And not one of them, in all the millions of pictures, ever thought to ask the obvious question, the question I asked the first time the route brought me here and have asked every time since: where is it trying to go?

The curtain stops at the crossroads, and here the panels converge — they angle in toward a point, echoing the prow, so that the whole curtain seems to become a ship too, a great soft yellow ship moored for a moment beside the thin stone one — and the hem lifts, and the cast pours into the triangular plaza around the prow. Figures with round cheerful instruments, the brass kind, the kind that go oom and pah. Machines like polished brass curls, like the

treble clefs of some enormous sheet of music. A crowd so dense and so small and so happy that it looks, at last, like the company the wedge has been sailing toward for a hundred and twenty years has finally, all at once, come aboard.

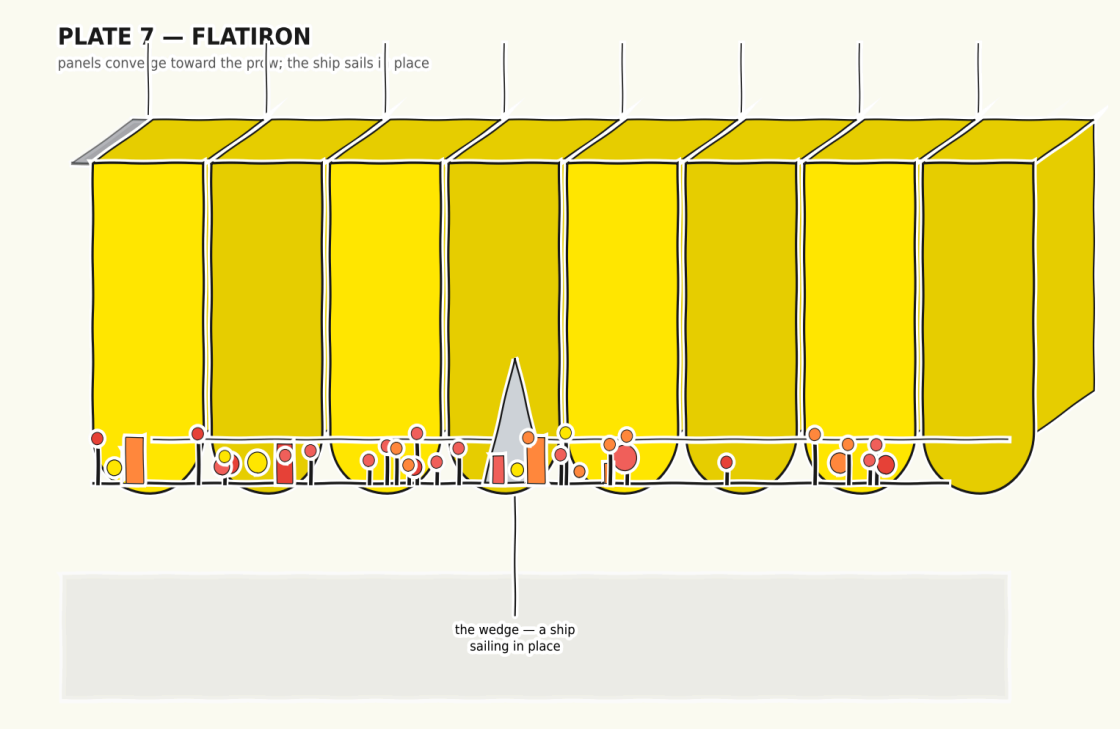
"I was beginning to think the destination was the point," the wedge says, and its voice is like a bow cutting calm water, a long clean sound with a hush inside it. "I was beginning to think — I have had a long time to think, sailing and never arriving — I was beginning to think I had failed. That a ship that never reaches port is a broken ship. That all this sailing, all these years, pointing north, splitting the avenues, and never once arriving anywhere — that it meant I had been built wrong, aimed at a harbor I would never make. I have been ashamed of it. Can you understand that? I have been ashamed, all this time, underneath the photographs, of never arriving."

And this, of all the things the buildings have confessed to me on this route, is the one that catches in my throat, because it is the most human of them, the most like the thing I hear in people, the exact shape of the shame I have felt myself and watched nearly everyone I love feel: the conviction that because you have not arrived, you have failed; that the not-yet is a verdict; that a life in motion toward something it has not reached is a life that has gone wrong rather than a life that is simply, gloriously, still going.

"You are a ship," I tell the wedge, and I put my hand on its cold thin stone prow as I say it, because some things should be said with a hand on the listener. "Listen. Ships are not for arriving. That is the whole thing you have had backwards, all these lonely years, and it is not your fault, because everyone has it backwards, the whole city has it backwards, the millions with their cameras have it backwards. A ship is not a failed harbor. A ship is the place the good part happens. The harbor is just where the good part stops. Everything that matters on a voyage happens on the deck, in motion, between the ports — the company, the weather, the songs, the long talks at the rail, the whole life of the crossing. The arriving is just the end of all that. You have not failed to arrive. You have succeeded, for a hundred and twenty years, at the actual point of being a ship, which is to carry everyone through the good part for as long as the good part can be made to last. You have been doing the thing the whole time. You only thought it was the waiting room for the thing."

The wedge is silent. The brass curls play — oom, pah, a fat happy marching tune — and the round-faced figures dance in the narrow triangle, packed prow to stern, and the dense small crowd sways, and for a long moment the wedge says nothing at all, and I wonder if I have said the wrong thing, pressed too hard, and then I feel it, under my hand on the stone prow: the wedge stops straining. For the first time in a hundred and twenty years, the great thin ship stops trying to get uptown. It stops leaning north. It stops sailing toward and simply sails — in place, gloriously, going absolutely nowhere, carrying absolutely everyone, the brass playing on its deck, the dancers swaying in its triangle, the whole good part

happening all over it at once now that it has finally stopped rushing toward the place where the good part would have to end.



Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at Flatiron

"Oh," says the wedge — there it is, the third "oh," the island's one great syllable of understanding — "oh, I do not have to get there. I never had to get there. The not-getting-there was never the failure. The not-getting-there was the voyage. I have been on the best part the entire time and spent it ashamed of not reaching the worst part, which is the end."

"The end is not the worst part," I say, because I do not want to leave it with that. "Arriving is sweet too, in its time. But you are not near your time, you are a building, you will sail for centuries yet, and the centuries are not a punishment to be endured until the harbor. They are the voyage. They are the gift. Sail them. Stop counting them as failures to arrive and start spending them as the crossing they are."

I keep coming back, in my mind, to the moment the wedge stopped straining. I have felt a great many buildings change under my hand on this route, but the wedge's change was the quietest and I think the largest. There was no dramatic motion. It did not suddenly turn or visibly relax or do anything a camera could have caught. It simply stopped doing one thing it had done every second for a hundred and twenty years: it stopped leaning north. It stopped aiming. The whole enormous effort of straining toward an unreachable harbor, an effort so constant the wedge had forgotten it was even making it, the way you forget the weight of

your own held breath until you let it out — it let it out. And the letting-out was the entire transformation, invisible and total, the building exactly where it had always been and entirely different, because it had put down a striving it had been carrying so long it had mistaken the striving for itself.

That is the thing about the strivings we carry longest: we stop being able to tell them apart from who we are. The wedge thought it was a thing that strained toward harbor. It was not. It was a ship, and the straining was something it was doing, not something it was, and the proof is that when it stopped straining it did not stop being a ship — it became more fully a ship, a ship at last doing the actual work of ships, which is carrying the good part. I think everyone has at least one striving they have carried so long they have confused it for their nature, one northward lean so constant they no longer feel themselves making it. And I think the kindest and most frightening question you can be asked is the one I asked the wedge with my hand on its prow: what are you straining toward, and what would you be if you simply stopped, and is the straining actually you, or is it only a thing you have been doing for so long that you forgot you were the one doing it and could, at any moment, by simply letting out the held breath, stop?

The brass curls play and the dancers dance and the cameras that have always, always aimed at the wedge's loneliness catch, this morning, the exact opposite of loneliness — a ship full of company, sailing in joyful place — and do not understand what they have caught, and keep it forever anyway, the way cameras keep things they do not understand, which is how most of the truest pictures get taken. The curtain dips its converging hem to the wedge, the way you tip your hat to a captain you respect, and we sail on without it, which is exactly right, which is the only right thing, because a ship should never leave its own deck, and the wedge's deck is where the wedge belongs, sailing in place at the crossroads, carrying everyone through the good part, for as many centuries as it is given, ashamed no longer.

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8. The Red Beneath the Yellow

HERALD SQUARE

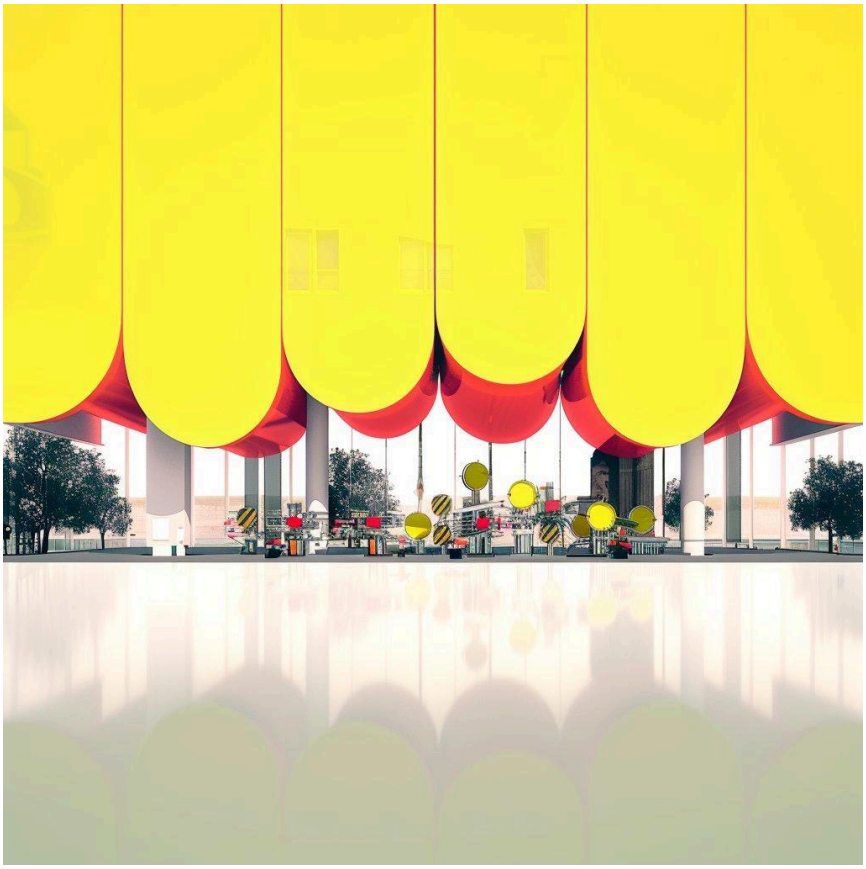

Plate 8

Something different happens at Herald Square, and I have thought about it more than any other stop on the route, turned it over more nights, and I am still not certain I understand it, and I have decided that not understanding it is correct, that some things you are meant to witness rather than explain. Here, when the curtain lifts its hem — and it lifts it high, higher than anywhere but the finale — you can see, for the first time on the whole journey, that the underside of the yellow is red. A deep, warm, coral red. The red of the inside of a thing. The color you only ever see when something opens to you completely, when it shows you not the face it shows the world but the warm secret lining it shows only to the few who have come close enough and stayed long enough to be shown.

All the way up the island the curtain has been yellow. Yellow to the harbor, yellow to the tall ones, yellow to the doodles and the arches and the bicycles — the public, glad, bright yellow that turns grey mornings warm, the yellow that is the whole reason the city looks up. That is the side that faces out. But the underside, the side that only the cast and I and the wakened buildings ever see when the hem lifts — the underside is this private coral red, and

at Herald Square, for reasons the curtain has never once explained to me in all my mornings, it lifts its hem so high that the whole neighborhood, all at once, every commuter and pigeon and patient awning, sees the red.

The cast below has arranged itself around discs striped yellow and black — caution-colored, the colors of edges and warnings, of mind-the-gap and wet-floor and do-not-cross — and small red signs, and for a moment, the first moment, I brace the way I braced at Union Square, because those are the colors of being careful, of being told no, of the world's ten thousand small refusals. Herald Square is a crossing place, a place of department stores and transit and hurry, a place that has spent its life telling people to watch their step, and the caution-stripes are its native tongue.

But the buildings have flipped the meaning. This is the thing the whole city learns once the curtain has passed through it; I have watched it happen at stop after stop; the meanings flip; the thing you were braced against turns out to be, all along, a thing you could have been delighted by, if only someone had framed it for you from a half-step away. “The edges are where the good stuff is,” says a building hung all over with the yellow-and-black striped discs, and it says it with the cheerful certainty of a thing that has just figured itself out. “We always thought the warning colors meant danger, meant stop, meant no. But that was never what they meant. Look at where you put a caution stripe — you put it exactly where something is about to happen. The edge of the platform. The lip of the stair. The threshold. The warning colors do not mean nothing-here. They mean everything-here. They mean: pay attention, pay attention, this is the spot where the world is most awake. The caution stripe is not a refusal. It is the city pointing at its own most alive places and saying look, look, here.”

And once it has said that, I cannot unsee it, and neither can you now, and neither could anyone at Herald Square that morning. There is so much, once you pay attention. So much, under the high-lifted hem, in the caution-colored light, in the warm red glow of the curtain's revealed underside. The square becomes more itself than any careful place has ever been allowed to be, every edge and threshold and lip of stair suddenly readable not as danger but as the city's own map of where its life is densest.

I think the red is the curtain's heart. I have come to think this slowly, over many mornings, and I think it is true. I think the yellow is what the curtain shows the world — the brave bright public gladness, the turning of grey mornings warm — and the red is what the curtain is actually made of, underneath, the warm secret thing it carries up the island and shows only when it lifts its hem high enough, only to those who are close enough, only for as long as it dares. The same way a person can be bright all day in public, can do the gladness and mean it, and still have, underneath, a private warmth, a coral lining, a heart-red they show only to the ones who have walked the whole length of the island beside them and earned, by the walking, the lifting of the hem. The yellow is real. I want to be clear: the

yellow is not a mask over the red, not a lie hiding a truth. The yellow is as true as the red. But the red is what the yellow is for. The brightness is in service of the warmth. The public gladness exists to carry the private heart safely up the island and show it, here, at the one stop where the hem lifts high enough, to everyone at once, before lowering again.

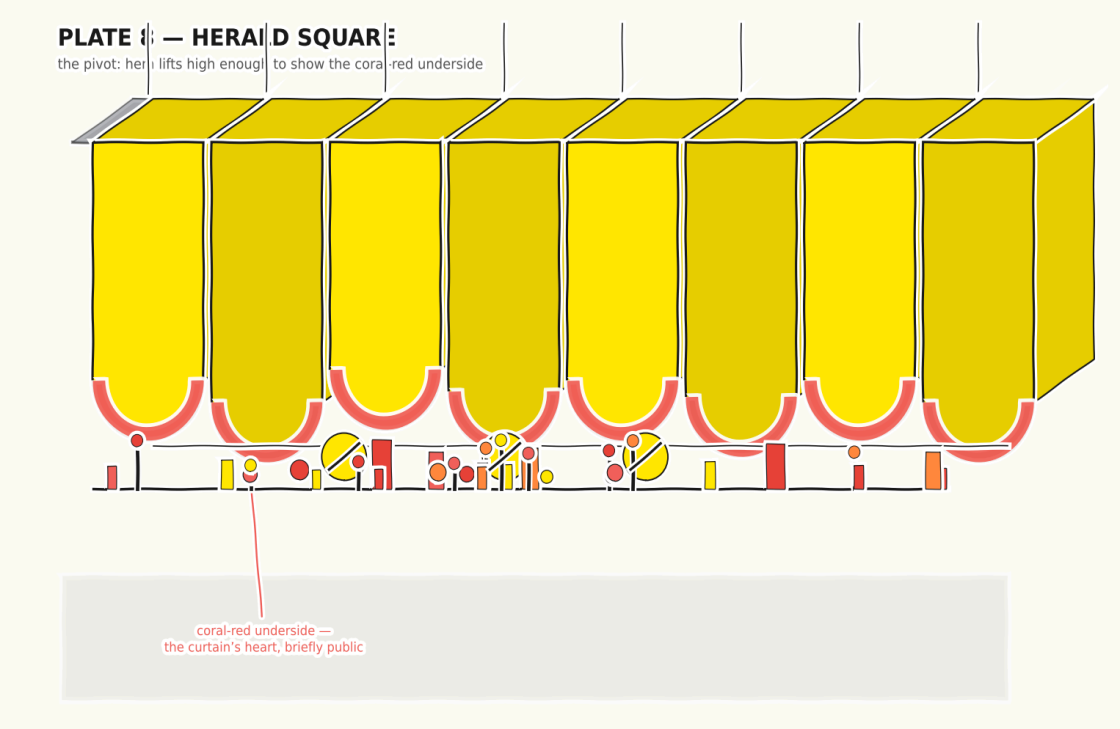
PLATE 8 — HERALD SQUARE
the pivot: hem lifts high enough to show the coral-red underside
coral-red underside —
the curtain's heart, briefly public

Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at Herald Square

"Why here," I ask the curtain, which does not usually answer me, which speaks even less than the mirror-pool, but which I ask anyway, every time, at this stop. "Why do you show the red here, at Herald Square, of all the stops? Why not at the Battery where we are alone, or at the finale where everyone is gathered? Why here, in the middle, in the hurry, in the place of crossings and cautions?"

And the curtain does not answer in words — it never answers in words — but it holds the high hem a moment longer, the red glowing warm over the caution-colored square, and I think I understand, or I witness without understanding, which is the same thing here. It shows the red in the middle, in the hurry, at the crossing, because the middle of the hurry is exactly where people most need to be shown a heart. Not at the peaceful start. Not at the triumphant end. In the grinding middle, in the place built for watching your step and minding the gap and being told no — that is where a glimpse of the warm red lining underneath the bright brave yellow does the most good, lands on the most tired and most careful and most hurried people, and tells them: the edges are where the good stuff is, the cautions are the city pointing at its own aliveness, and underneath all the brightness you are

asked to perform there is a real warm heart, and it is the same in you as it is in the curtain, and it is allowed, here, in the middle of the hurry, to be briefly and completely seen.

I have wondered, on the quiet walks after Herald Square, whether everyone has a coral-red underside, or only some of us, and I have decided that everyone does, and that the only variable is how high they are willing to lift the hem and who they will lift it for. The yellow side is real — I keep insisting on this because it matters — the bright public glad side is not a costume over the true self; it is also the true self; a person can be genuinely, all-the-way bright in the daylight and still have the warm red lining underneath, and the lining does not make the brightness a lie. But the lining is what the brightness is in service of. We are bright in public partly to protect the red, to carry it safely through the day, to keep it from being grabbed at by everyone who passes. And then, with the few — the ones who have walked the length of the island beside us, the ones who have earned it by staying — we lift the hem, and show the red, and it is the most frightening and the most necessary thing a person ever does.

What Herald Square taught me, specifically, is that the showing of the red is best done not in the safe places but in the hard ones. I would have guessed the opposite. I would have guessed you show your warm secret heart in the quiet protected moments, at the peaceful start of things or the triumphant end, in the Battery's calm or the finale's glory. But the curtain shows the red in the middle, in the hurry, at the crossing-place full of caution-stripes and people watching their step — because the middle of the hurry is exactly where a glimpsed heart does the most work. The tired and the careful and the hurried, the ones minding the gap, the ones who have been told no by the world ten thousand times that day — those are the ones who most need to see, suddenly, in the caution-colored light, that underneath all the brightness everyone is performing there is a real warm heart, and that it is the same in them, and that the edges they have been taught to fear are only the city pointing at where its life is densest. You show the red in the hard place. That is where it lands.

The hem lowers. The red disappears back into secret, back under the public yellow, to be carried on up the island toward the green. But everyone at Herald Square saw it. The whole hurrying crossing-place saw the warm red heart of the thing, for one held moment, in the caution-colored light. And you cannot unsee a thing's true color once it has been shown to you. The square will be warmer now, forever, underneath its stripes and signs and hurry — not because the stripes are gone, they are not gone, the cautions remain, the gap is still to be minded — but because the square now knows what the cautions were always pointing at, and knows what is underneath the brightness it is asked to wear, and a place that knows that hurries a little more kindly, watches its step a little more tenderly, and minds the gap as one minds the edge of something precious rather than the edge of something dangerous. We

move on. I am quiet for a while after Herald Square. I always am. Some stops you leave laughing and some you leave quiet, and the quiet ones are not the lesser ones.

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9. The Square That Was Already a Stage

TIMES SQUARE

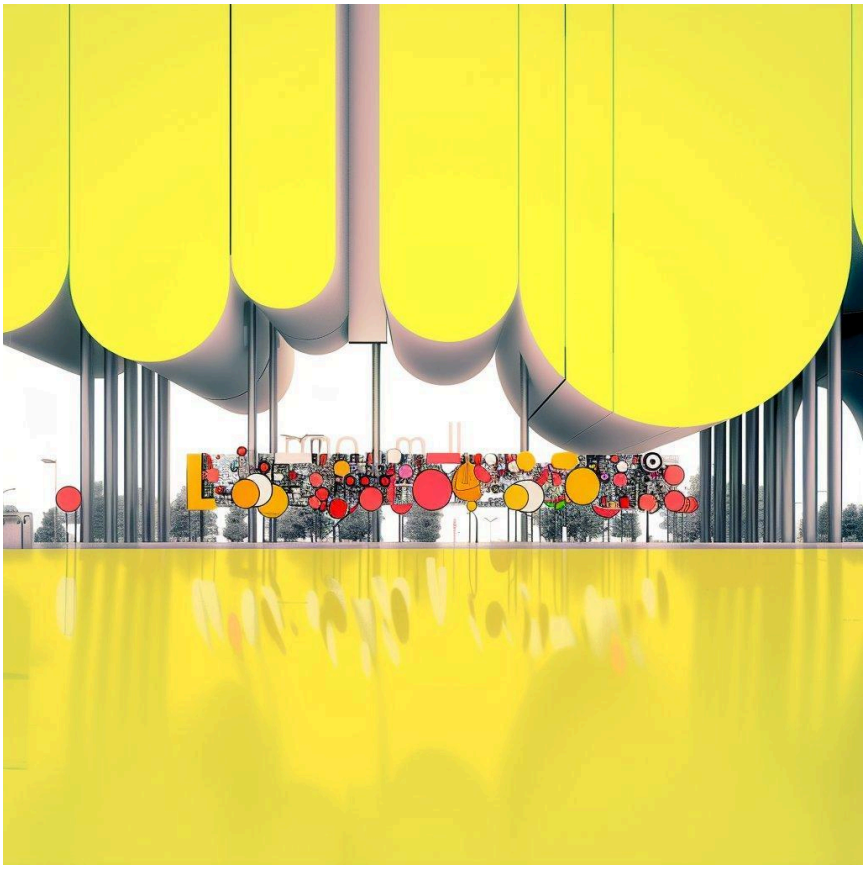


Plate 9

And then Times Square, which I had been dreading since the Battery, which I dread every single morning of the route, because Times Square is already a performance. It is the one place on the island that needs no curtain to put on a show; it has been putting on a show for a century without stopping; it is all light and noise and enormous faces selling enormous things, all brightness turned up past brightness into a kind of roar, and I genuinely did not know, the first time the route brought me here, what a curtain could possibly add to a place that never once stops shouting that it is alive. What do you frame, for a place that is nothing but frame? What do you reveal, for a place that hides nothing because it has buried everything under light?

I had it backwards, of course. I usually have it backwards at first; that is what a keeper is for, to have it backwards and then be corrected by the stop itself; the buildings are the teachers and I am the slow bright pupil. The curtain does not lift its hem at Times Square. It does the opposite. It lowers. All the way down, almost to the ground, the great yellow panels descending until only a hand's width of gap remains at the very bottom — the inverse of the

Battery, the inverse of every other stop — so that the great shouting square is not revealed but covered, dimmed, hushed to a soft yellow twilight, the enormous selling faces filtered down to a glow, the roar muffled to something you could speak over, then whisper over, then simply sit inside of.

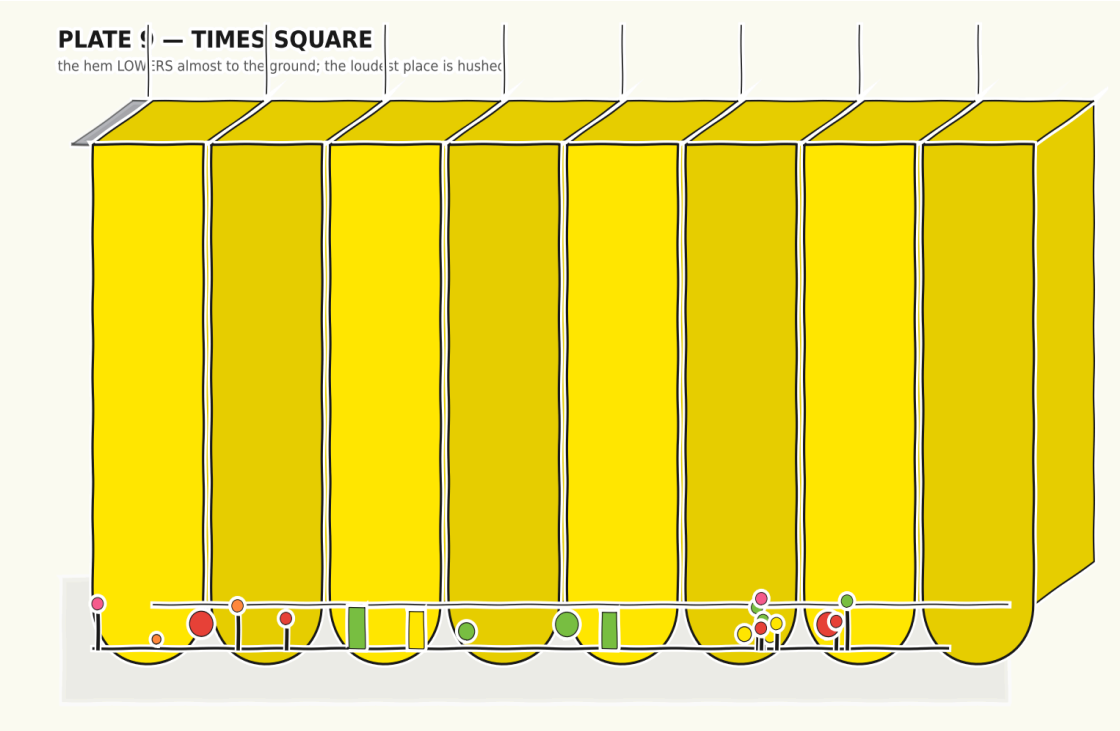
And underneath, in the hand's width of gentled light at the very bottom, very small and very real, the cast is revealed doing something Times Square has not done in a hundred years. Nothing in particular. That is what they are doing. Just being there. Small bright figures and red dots and white circles, scattered, unhurried, not performing, not selling, not shouting, not even playing the way the cast-iron children played — just present, just sitting and drifting and being, in the soft yellow dark, in the one quiet pocket at the bottom of the loudest place on earth.

"Oh," says Times Square — and I have been waiting nine stops to hear Times Square say "oh," and it is worth the wait, because it says it in a voice I have never once heard it use, a voice with not a single advertisement in it, a voice with the brightness turned all the way down to the pilot light, and under all the roar it turns out Times Square has a voice like that, small and astonished and tired. "Oh. Oh, I forgot. I forgot I was allowed to be quiet. I have been so loud for so long that I forgot quiet was a thing I could choose. I thought — I thought if I stopped shouting that I was alive, even for a moment, I would stop being alive. I thought the noise was the life. I thought if I went quiet I would simply go out, like a sign switched off, like a bulb pulled."

"You have been performing so hard, for so long," I tell it, gently, the way you speak in a dim quiet room to someone just waking, "that you forgot performing was supposed to feel like this. You forgot there was a you underneath the performance. The noise is not your life. The noise is your job, and you are extraordinary at your job, the best in the world at it, and the world genuinely loves you for it. But the life is the thing underneath the job, the thing that is here right now in the soft dark, the small real present thing that does not have to shout to exist. You will not go out if you go quiet. That is the fear and it is not true. Watch — you are quiet right now, the quietest you have been in a hundred years, and you have not gone out. You are more here than you have ever been. The quiet did not switch you off. The quiet switched you on, all the way, for the first time in a century."

Under the lowered yellow the square rests. The little figures drift in the gentled light. Nobody is selling anyone anything. The famous, ferocious, world-renowned light — filtered down through the whole towering height of the curtain — lands soft as the light through a tent on a summer afternoon when you are very small and have been told that you may nap or not nap, exactly as you like, that there is nothing you are required to do, that the long gold afternoon has no task in it at all. The loudest place in the world discovers that it is allowed to whisper. And the whisper, it turns out, is the truest thing it has ever said — truer

than any of the enormous bright certain things it has shouted for a hundred years — because the whisper is the only thing it has ever said that was not for sale, not aimed at a buyer, not performed for a crowd. The whisper is just the square, talking to itself, in the dark, finding out it still exists when the lights are down.



Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at Times Square

I almost cannot bear how tender it is. Of all the stops, this is the one I did not expect to be tender, and it is the most tender of all, precisely because it is the loudest place gone quiet, the most armored place gone soft, and the contrast is the whole of the ache. I sit down in the soft yellow dark with the drifting cast and the resting square, and I do nothing in particular, the way they are doing nothing in particular, and it is, I think, the most radical thing I do all day. To sit in the middle of Times Square doing nothing, wanting nothing, selling nothing, performing nothing — just being there, small and real, in the hush — it feels almost illegal, and it is the opposite of illegal, it is the most permitted thing there is, and the gap between how it feels and what it is, is exactly the size of everything the square has been carrying for a hundred years.

"Can I stay like this," the square asks me, very small. "Can I just — stay quiet? Forever? It is so much easier. It is so much kinder."

"No," I tell it, and it is the only time on the whole route I tell a building no, and I tell it gently, because the no is a kindness. "You cannot stay quiet forever, because the world loves your noise, truly loves it, and would miss it, and the noise is a real gift you give that no other

place can give. But — and this is everything — you do not have to choose. That was the lie you were living under: that you had to be all noise or you would go out. You can be loud again tomorrow, gloriously loud, the best in the world. And you can carry this quiet inside the noise. You can know, even at your loudest, that the quiet is still here underneath, that you still exist when the lights are down, that the performance is the job and not the life. The quiet does not replace the noise. It holds it. The way the square's grief held its bicycles. The way the curtain's red holds up its yellow. You are allowed both. You were always allowed both. You only ever had to be shown the quiet once, to know it was there, and now you have been shown, and you will never quite forget it, even at your loudest, especially at your loudest."

The fear that Times Square named — that to go quiet is to go out, that the noise is the life and silence is extinction — is the most common fear I meet on the whole route, and it does not only afflict squares. It afflicts the brightest people, the loudest givers, the ones who are always on, always performing aliveness, always turned up past brightness into the roar, because somewhere they learned that if they ever stopped proving they were alive, the proof would lapse and they would simply cease. These are often the people everyone calls the most full of life, and they are, and they are also the most exhausted, because proving you are alive is different from being alive and very much more tiring, and a person can spend a whole life so busy with the proof that they never once rest in the simple fact, the way Times Square had not rested in a hundred years.

Watching the loudest place in the world discover that the quiet did not switch it off — that it was more present in the hush than it had ever been in the roar — I thought about how to give that gift to a person rather than a square, and I decided you cannot give it by telling. You cannot tell a person who fears the silence that the silence is safe; they will not believe you; the fear is older than your telling. You can only do what the curtain did: lower the hem for them, gently, make a small protected pocket of quiet around them, sit in it with them doing nothing in particular, and let them discover for themselves, in their own body, that they did not go out. The discovery has to be theirs. The keeper only makes the pocket and sits in it alongside, so that the frightened bright thing is not alone in the first terrifying quiet, and can find out, with company, that being is enough, that they do not have to earn their own existence every waking second, that the lights can go down and they remain.

The curtain raises its hem again, slowly, so slowly, giving the square back its voice the way you wake someone you love — not all at once, not with a shout, but a little at a time, a hand's width and then another, the gentled light brightening by degrees, the muffled roar swelling back gradually, so that the good part of the quiet has time to come up with the square into the returning noise, to be carried inside it, not left behind in the dark. By the time the hem is high the square is loud again, shouting again that it is alive — but it is shouting it differently now, I can hear the difference, there is a quiet inside the shout that

was not there before, a pilot light that knows it is a pilot light, a self underneath the performance that has been seen and will not be forgotten. We move on. The noise follows us a little way up the island and then lets us go, the way the harbor let us go, fondly, knowing we come back. I am still quiet myself. Times Square does that to me. We have five stops to go, and the light is beginning, just beginning, to think about gold.

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10. The Garden Behind the Letters

BRYANT PARK

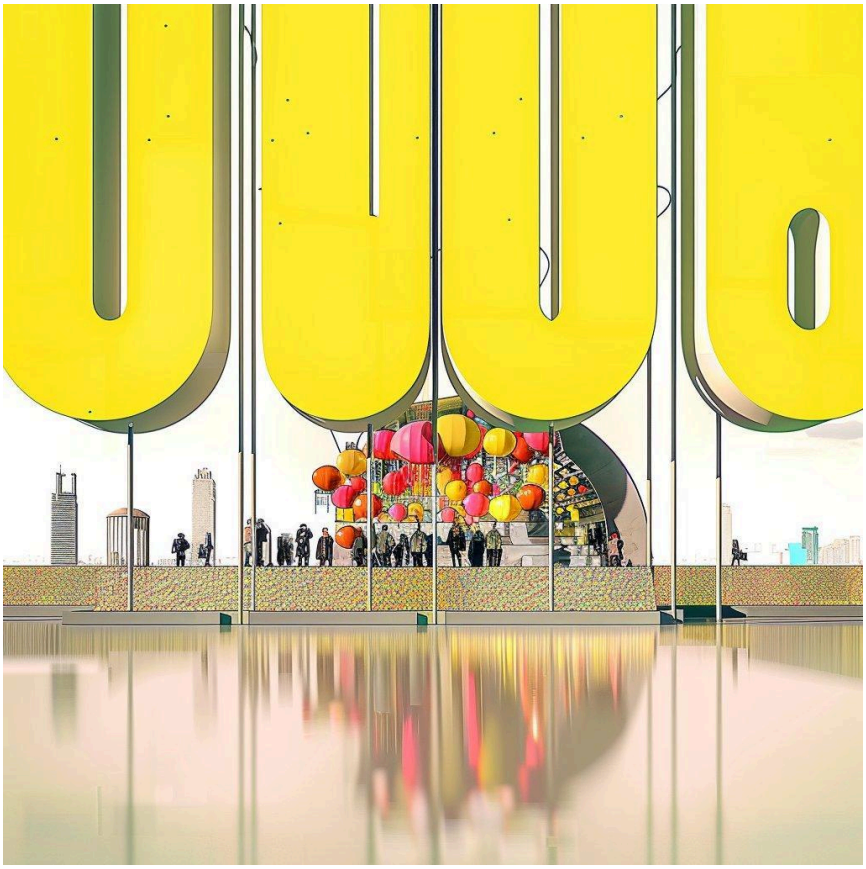

Plate 10

At Bryant Park the curtain hangs in its hugest form yet — four vast yellow columns, each one wide as a building, tall as the sky will allow, like the letters of a single word too big to read all at once, a word you would have to walk the length of to spell — and between the columns, framed in the bright gaps, is the green of the park, and the gathered crowd, and — this is the wonder of the stop, the thing that makes Bryant Park the one I keep closest of all — a great cluster of round paper lanterns. Pink and orange and gold, bunched together and glowing, dozens of them, a whole bouquet of small warm suns, as if the curtain had been carrying this bouquet the entire way up the island, cradled in secret behind the public yellow, and only now, here, at the great library garden, set it gently down for everyone to see.

The cast gathers thick around the lanterns, ours and the park's own, and the real crowd gathers with them, the lunchtime crowd, the readers, the chess-players, the ones who come to this one green square in the middle of all that midtown stone to remember that the city has a softness in it somewhere. There is a whole skyline behind them — the real one, the grey-and-glass towers crowding up on every side, the enormous indifferent city — and for

once, for this one held moment, the skyline is not the point. The towers are the backdrop. The point is the lanterns. The point is the small warm glowing cluster of light in the green, and the gathered faces turned toward it, and the great yellow letters framing it, and the whole enormous indifferent city reduced, correctly, to scenery behind the one warm thing that matters.

"We held so many words," says the great building behind the lanterns, the one full of reading rooms and stairs and the particular hush of a place where people have come to read for a hundred years, the library itself, its voice the sound of a thousand pages turning very softly all at once. "Millions of them. Every word anyone ever wrote down and wanted kept. We thought the words were the treasure. We built ourselves into a fortress for the words, marble and bronze and the lions out front to guard them, and we have guarded them faithfully for a century, all those millions of words, all that shelved and catalogued and protected language. We thought that was the whole of what we were for."

"The words were maps," I tell it, looking at the lanterns, because you cannot look at the library and the lanterns both at once and I have chosen, this morning, the lanterns. "Every one of those millions of words was a map. That is what words are; that is the only thing words have ever been; they are maps to places that are not made of words. And this —" I gesture at the lanterns, the green, the gathered glowing faces "— this is one of the places they were maps to. All those words about light and warmth and gathering and the soft middle of a hard city — they were directions here. To this. You did not spend a hundred years guarding the treasure. You spent a hundred years guarding the maps to the treasure, which was a fine and necessary thing to do, but the treasure itself was never on your shelves. It was always out here, in the garden behind your letters, in the lanterns, in the green, in the gathering. The words point here. You can stop guarding long enough to come and stand in the place they point to. The maps will keep. They are very well guarded. Come and stand in the light a moment."

And the library — I felt this rather than saw it, the way I feel most of the deepest things on the route — the library relaxes. A century of vigilant guarding eases by one notch. Not because the words stop mattering; they matter; the maps are precious and must be kept; but because the library understands, perhaps for the first time, that it is allowed to also be a place that the maps lead to, allowed to enjoy the treasure and not only guard the directions to it, allowed to come out from behind its own letters and stand in the lantern-light it has spent a hundred years describing and protecting and pointing toward.

The lanterns glow. The crowd stands in the green between the huge yellow letters and the small warm suns, and reads neither — not the giant unreadable yellow word, not the millions of guarded words in the marble fortress — and simply stands in the light, which is, when you come right down to it, the only reading that was ever really required. All the words

were always trying to teach this one thing: stand in the light a while, with others, in the green, and let the indifferent city be scenery. That is the treasure. That is what every map on every shelf was drawn to lead you to. And here it is, free, requiring no library card, open to anyone who will stop and stand and glow.

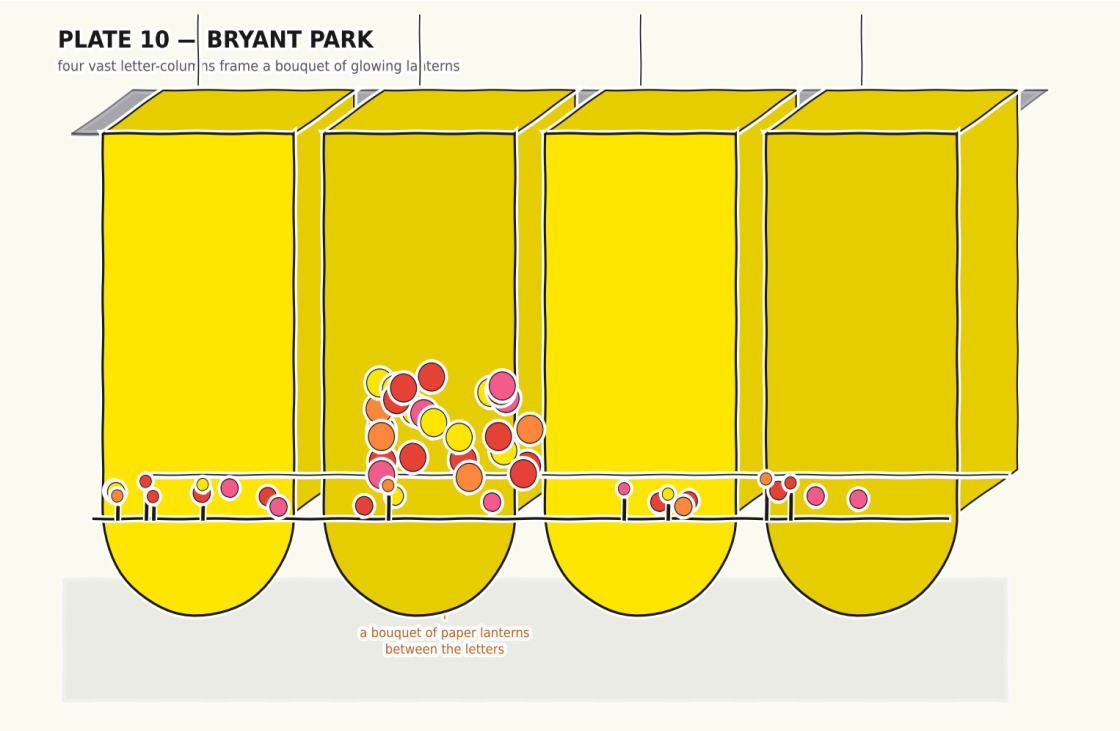
PLATE 10 — BRYANT PARK
four vast letter-columns frame a bouquet of glowing lanterns
a bouquet of paper lanterns
between the letters

Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at Bryant Park

I keep this stop closest of all of them. I should explain why, since I have said it twice now. A child curtain-keeper spends a great deal of the day among large and important and difficult things — bowing towers, grieving squares, ashamed ships, the loudest place on earth learning to whisper — and it is good work, the best work, but it is heavy, the way the square's memory is heavy, the way carrying anything precious is heavy. And then I come to Bryant Park, and the library sets down its century of guarding, and the lanterns glow in the green, and the whole vast clever important city is gently informed that it is only the backdrop — and I am, for a moment, not a keeper of anything, not responsible for anything, just one more small glowing face in the gathered crowd, standing in the light, reading nothing, required to do nothing, home. Of all the gifts the route gives, this is the one it gives to me: the lantern stop, where even the keeper gets to put the broom down and just stand in the warm.

"Will you stay," the library asks me, gently, the way the doodles asked, the way Times Square asked, the way everything kind eventually asks the one who is always leaving. "You keep everyone else's joy. You frame it and carry it and give it away up the island. Will you stay here, in the light you brought us to, just once, just this once, and let it be yours?"

I have thought about why it is the library, of all the buildings, that most needed to be told the words were maps, and I think it is because the library had done everything right and was still not free. It had been faithful. It had guarded the words for a century, kept them safe, catalogued and protected and made available the whole vast inheritance of human language, and there is nothing to criticize in that, it is noble work, the lions out front have earned their keep. But faithfulness to the maps had quietly become a substitute for ever visiting the territory. The library had guarded the directions to joy so devotedly that it had never walked to the joy itself, and worse, had come to believe that guarding the directions was the same as arriving, that a life spent protecting maps to the treasure was indistinguishable from a life that had found the treasure. It is the most respectable way to miss your life, and the hardest to see, because it looks exactly like virtue.

And the cure was not to abandon the maps. I want to be careful here, because it would be easy to take the wrong lesson, to think the library should fling open its doors and let the words scatter and run out into the garden and never guard anything again. No. The words are precious; the maps must be kept; a world that loses its directions to joy will wander. The cure was only for the library to understand that it was allowed to be both — the guardian of the maps and a visitor to the territory; the keeper of the directions and a person who occasionally follows them; the marble fortress and also, when the lanterns are lit, one more glowing face in the green. Both. Not instead. The library did not have to choose between guarding and living, and the moment it understood that it did not have to choose, a century of vigilance eased by one notch, and it came out from behind its own letters, just for the evening, just far enough to stand in the light it had spent a hundred years describing, and it was still, the next morning, a perfectly good library. Better, even. A library that has stood in the lantern-light guards the maps to the lantern-light more tenderly, because now it knows, firsthand, what they lead to.

And I do. For a little while, I do. I set the broom against the base of one of the great yellow letters, and I walk into the green among the gathered crowd, and I stand under the bouquet of glowing lanterns with the readers and the chess-players and the cast and the eased library, and I read nothing, and I guard nothing, and I keep nothing, and I am no one's keeper, and the warm light lands on my upturned face the same as on every other, and I let it be mine. The curtain holds the scene. It is in no hurry. It never is. And it knows, I think, that the keeper needs this stop more than any building does, and it gives it to me freely, the way I give the framing to everyone else, and for once on the whole long route I am not the one giving the gift. I am the one standing in the light receiving it. We move on, eventually. I pick the broom back up. But I look back twice — not once, twice, which I do at no other stop — because the lantern-light is the warm I will hold up against my own grey mornings, the way I am teaching the whole island to hold up warm things against the grey,

and a keeper has grey mornings too, and needs, like everyone, a bouquet of small suns to remember on them.

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11. The Flower Wall Speaks

GRAND CENTRAL

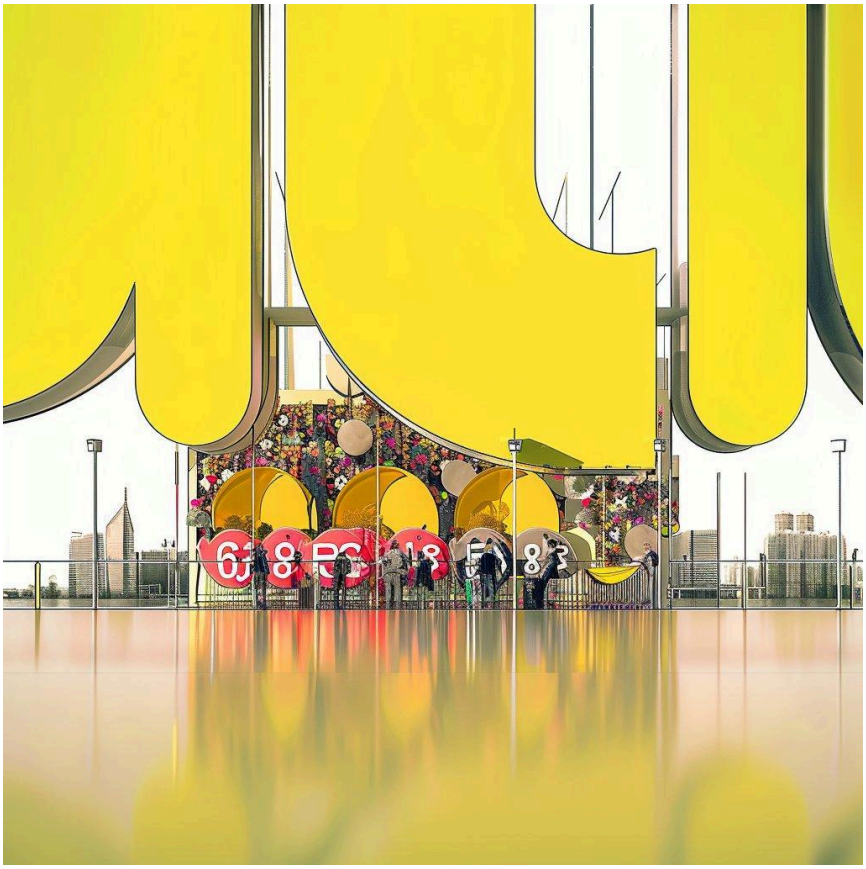


Plate 11

Grand Central is the heart the whole island pumps through. I do not say that as a flourish; I say it as a fact of circulation; every day the better part of a city's worth of people flows in through its doors and out through its doors, up from the trains and out into the streets and back down again, a great tidal pulse of human movement that has not stopped, except for grief and emergency, in over a hundred years. It is the heart. And when the curtain stops here it hangs in two enormous yellow forms, two great soft pillars, and between them it frames a wall of flowers — a whole facade gone entirely to bloom, thousands upon thousands of them, every color there is, climbing the great stone front of the station the way the crowds inside climb the great stone stairs, and beneath the flower wall the cast has set up round golden arches and small red letters that very nearly, but not quite, spell a word.

Everyone passes through Grand Central. That is its entire life, and it is a strange life when you stop to consider it, which no one ever does, because no one stops — that is the point of the place, that no one stops. Grand Central exists to be passed through. A million times a day it is crossed by people on their way to somewhere that is emphatically not Grand

Central; no one's destination is the station; the station is the place you move through on the way to the place you are going. It has spent a century as the most magnificent in-between in the world, a cathedral built for transit, a palace whose entire purpose is that you do not linger in it. It is, when you put it that way, a kind of loneliness even greater than the wedge's — the wedge at least is looked at; Grand Central is walked through, by everyone, endlessly, and truly seen by almost no one, because to see it you would have to stop, and to stop is the one thing the place is designed to prevent.

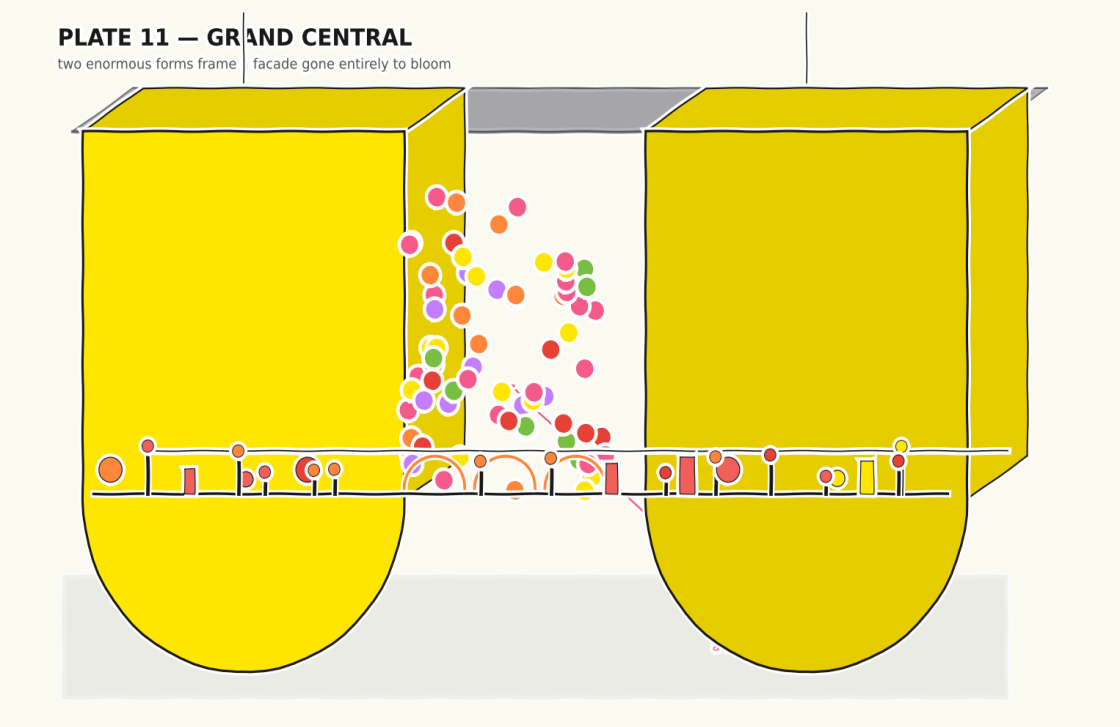
The flower wall is the building's answer to that, and it is the wisest answer I have heard on the whole route, wiser than the tower's bow, wiser than the square's keel, and I have thought about it on every walk since. “If I am only ever passed through,” the station says — and its voice is the murmur of a hundred million footsteps gone gentle, the softest enormous voice on the island, a whisper made of multitudes — “if lingering is the one thing no one will ever do in me, then let me be the most beautiful passing-through there has ever been. Let me bloom so completely that no one can cross me without carrying a little of the bloom out the other side. I cannot make them stop. I have stopped trying to make them stop; that was always going to fail; that was never my purpose. But I can make sure that every single person who passes through me — every one, the hurried and the late and the grieving and the joyful and the ten thousand who will never once look up — carries out of me, into wherever they are rushing, a little of this bloom. They will not know they are carrying it. That is fine. It will work anyway.”

And they do carry it. I stand and watch — I am very still at this stop, the way you go still in the presence of something giving itself away — I watch the small figures and the real crowds move under the golden arches and past the climbing flowers, and I watch the flowers go with them. Not the actual flowers; the actual flowers stay, climbing the facade, blooming and blooming. But the fact of the flowers goes. The having-passed-the-flowers. The small involuntary lift that even the most hurried, most head-down, most certain commuter feels crossing through a place that has chosen to bloom at them — that lift rides out on every single one of them, out into all the rooms and streets and trains and homes of the whole island, a hundred million tiny unrecorded liftings a day, carried by people who do not know they are carrying anything, into rooms that will be one degree warmer for their arrival and never know why.

“You give yourself away all day,” I say to the station, and my voice does the thing it did at the wedge, catches a little, because this is the stop that catches me the way Herald Square catches me, quietly, deeply, in the place where I keep my own questions about what it is to be a keeper who is always giving and always moving on. “You give yourself away to a hundred million people a day, every one of them leaving, every one of them on their way to somewhere that is not you, and you bloom for them anyway, give them the lift anyway, send the bloom out anyway on people who will never thank you and mostly never see you. And

here is the thing I cannot stop marveling at: you are not one petal less. You give yourself away entirely, all day, every day, for a hundred years, and you are not diminished. You are the opposite of diminished. You bloom more the more you give. How? How are you not used up?"

"That is the secret of stations," the flower wall says, and the whisper-made-of-multitudes goes very soft, very kind, the way a voice goes when it is about to tell you the one true thing it knows. "It is the thing it took me a hundred years of being walked through to learn, and I will give it to you, because you look like someone who needs it and has not yet been told. A station is not a vessel that empties when it gives. It is a channel that flows. The flowers do not come from a store inside me that runs down; they come from the giving itself; the more I give the bloom away, the more bloom there is to give, because the blooming and the giving are the same single act and not two acts, one of which depletes the other. I do not bloom and then give the bloom. I bloom by giving. The giving is the blooming. That is how I am not used up. You cannot use up a channel by letting the water flow through it. You can only use up a channel by damming it."



Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at Grand Central

It pauses, the great soft whisper, and the crowds flow under the golden arches, and the flowers climb, and then it says the thing that I have carried every day since, the thing I think it said while looking, somehow, directly at me, though a flower wall has no eyes and I may have imagined the looking, and it does not matter whether I imagined it because the words were true regardless of where they were aimed:

“It is the secret of curtains too, I think. And of keepers. You did not think I knew what you are. But I am the heart of the island; everything passes through me; I have felt the curtain go by a thousand times, lifting its hem up the line, giving the frame away at stop after stop and never keeping it, moving on always, carrying everyone's joy and lingering in none of it. And I have felt you, small keeper, with your broom and your keys, doing the same — giving the framing away to every neighborhood, receiving the thanks of none, moving always on. You worry, I think, that you are being used up. That all this giving-away of other people's joy will empty you, that a keeper who keeps everyone's gladness but their own will run down like a vessel. But you are not a vessel. You are a channel. The same as me. The same as the curtain. You do not give the joy and then have less joy. You make joy by giving it. The giving is the gladness. You are not being used up, little keeper. You are flowing. You will not run dry. Channels do not run dry from flowing. They run dry only from being dammed, and you, I can see, have not dammed yourself; you have let it flow through you, stop after stop, all the way up the island; and that is why you arrive at the green each evening not empty but full, fuller than you began, the way I am fuller of bloom each night than each morning, having given it all away all day.”

I do not say anything for a while. There is nothing to say to being seen that completely, by the heart of the island, in the middle of the route, with the flowers climbing and the crowds flowing through. I had not known I was carrying the worry until the flower wall named it — the keeper's private fear, the one underneath the broom and the keys, the fear that a life spent framing other people's joy and moving always on is a life that will eventually empty out, that the giving-away is a slow leak, that I will arrive one evening at the green with nothing left. And the heart of the island reached out with its hundred-million-footstep whisper and told me: no. The giving is the having. The flowing is the fullness. You are not leaking. You are a channel, and channels are made to flow, and a flowing channel is the most full a channel can ever be.

The thing about being a channel rather than a vessel — the secret the flower wall gave me — is that it rearranges what you are afraid of. A vessel is afraid of being emptied. It hoards; it rations; it gives carefully, tracking what goes out, because every gift is a subtraction from a finite store and the bottom of the store is death. A great many people live as vessels, and you can always tell, because they keep accounts — of kindness given and not returned, of love spent and not repaid, of the slowly draining reserve they are certain they are running down. But a channel is afraid of the opposite thing. A channel is not afraid of being emptied, because flowing does not empty a channel; a channel is afraid only of being blocked, dammed, stopped up, because a channel that cannot flow is a channel that stagnates, and stagnation, not depletion, is how a channel dies. The fears are perfect opposites. The vessel fears giving too much. The channel fears giving too little, or rather,

fears the blockage that prevents the giving, because for a channel the giving is the living and anything that stops the flow stops the life.

And I had been living as a vessel without knowing it — keeping accounts I did not know I was keeping, certain underneath everything that all this framing and giving-away of joy was slowly running me down toward some empty evening when there would be nothing left to give. The flower wall, the heart of the island, the most given-away thing there is, looked at me with its imagined eyes and told me I had the whole thing backwards: that I was not a vessel running down but a channel flowing, that the joy I gave away was not subtracted from a store but generated by the giving, that I would not arrive empty but full, fuller than I began, the way a river is most a river where it is most flowing. I have tried to live as a channel since. It is not easy; the vessel-fear is old and comes back; some evenings I catch myself keeping accounts again, rationing, certain I am running down. But then I remember the blooming facade that is not one petal less for having given itself away to a hundred million people, and I unblock, and I let it flow, and I am, reliably, more full for the flowing, every single time, which is the proof, repeated daily, that the heart of the island was right.

The curtain holds the scene a long time. It lets the flower wall finish saying what it is saying to me; I think the curtain wanted me to hear it; I think, in fact, that the curtain has been carrying me to this stop, to this particular telling, for as many mornings as I have been a keeper, waiting for the morning I would be ready to hear the heart of the island explain to me why I do not run dry. This was that morning. I let the flower wall look at me, or imagine it looking, and I let myself be the one receiving the framing for once, the way I let myself receive the lantern-light at Bryant Park, except that this is deeper, this goes to the keeper's deepest worry and answers it. Then we go, both of us a little more given-away, both of us no less, the station blooming behind us and flowing its bloom out into the island on a hundred million unknowing carriers, and the keeper walking on up the track with the broom on the shoulder and the worry, for the first time, set down. Three stops to go. The light is gold now, truly gold, no longer thinking about it but arrived at it. The day is getting on. The best part is close.

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12. The Round Ones Hold the Hem Up

CENTRAL PARK SOUTH

Plate 12

At Central Park South the curtain meets the green at last. We have climbed the whole island to get here, stop by stop, and now the great park opens to the north like a held breath finally let go, like the moment in a long piece of music when the tight knotted theme finally resolves and opens out into the wide major chord it was straining toward the whole time. And here, at the edge of the green, the curtain hangs in the two largest forms of the entire apparatus — the two biggest soft yellow shapes I have ever seen it make, round and full and nearly touching the ground — and between them and beneath them stands a long row of small round figures, identical and beloved, pale and simple and smiling, holding the hem up.

This is the only stop on the entire route where the cast does the curtain's own work. I want you to understand how unusual this is, because I did not understand it myself until I had walked the route many times. Everywhere else — the Battery, the canyon, the arches, the loud square, all of them — the curtain lifts its own hem. That is the whole mechanism of the thing; the curtain wakes, the curtain lifts, the scene is revealed; the cast performs but the

curtain does the lifting. Only here, at the edge of the park, does the curtain not lift itself. Here the round ones do it. A whole long patient line of them, standing on their small simple legs, holding the great yellow weight up over their heads with their small simple arms, so that the city behind can see into the green, and the green ahead can see out into the city, and the two halves of the island — the built and the grown, the stone and the leaf — can finally, with the hem held up out of the way, look directly at each other with nothing in between.

"Is it heavy," I ask the round ones, because it must be. It is the largest curtain in the world, the two biggest forms it has ever made, and they are very small, smaller than me, each one no bigger than a child, and they are holding the whole enormous yellow weight up on their own small shoulders and arms, a hundred of them in a row, and it must be heavy, it must be impossibly heavy, and I am suddenly afraid for them, the way I was afraid for the small red child in Tribeca, the protective fear that comes up in a keeper at the sight of small things bearing large ones.

"Yes," the round ones say, all together, in one voice made of a hundred small voices, and — this is the part that undoes me — they say it cheerfully. Not bravely, the way you say yes-it-is-heavy while straining. Cheerfully, easily, the way you state a pleasant fact. "Yes, it is heavy. The curtain is the heaviest thing on the island. That is exactly why there are so many of us. Look — look how many. We did not each come to hold the whole curtain. No one of us could hold the whole curtain; it would crush any one of us flat; we are far too small. That was never the plan. The plan is that there are a hundred of us, and each of us holds only our own part, the small piece of hem directly over our own head, no more than that, only what our own two arms can manage — and we stand close, very close, shoulder to shoulder, so close there are no gaps — and because all of us are holding, all at once, each holding only our own light part, the whole impossible weight is held, easily, by no one of us and all of us. The weight is not heavy because the weight is shared. The weight is only heavy if you try to hold it alone. We never try to hold it alone. That is the only rule. Hold your part, stand close, and never, ever try to hold it alone."

I sit down at the edge of the green, in front of the long smiling row of them, and I look at the held-up hem, the great yellow weight borne so easily on so many small willing shoulders, and I think I learn more in that moment than at any other stop on the whole route. The tall ones taught me about permission. The square taught me about grief as ballast. The wedge taught me about the voyage, the flower wall about flowing and not running dry. But the round ones at Central Park South, who are not even buildings, who are just a hundred small glad identical selves standing close together holding up something enormous — they teach me the thing underneath all the other things, the mechanism of the whole island, the answer to a question I had not even known to ask: how does the city carry its joy? It is so much joy. The bowing and the blooming and the singing arches and the quieted square and the loosed doodles — it is an enormous weight of joy, far too much for

any one building or one keeper or one curtain to hold; it would crush any one thing that tried to hold it alone. And the answer is the round ones' answer. No one holds it alone. Each holds their part. All stand close. The joy is light because the joy is shared, and it is only ever heavy, only ever crushing, when someone tries to hold it — or to make it, or to keep it, or to deserve it — alone.

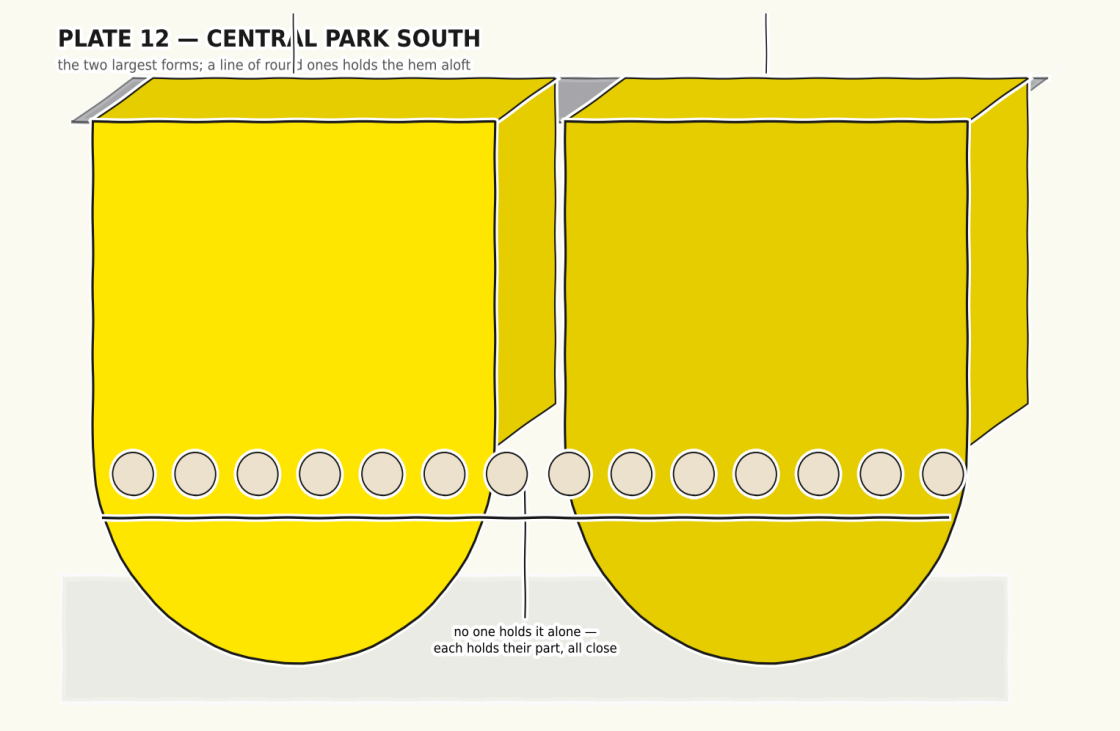
PLATE 12 — CENTRAL PARK SOUTH
the two largest forms; a line of round ones holds the hem aloft
no one holds it alone —
each holds their part, all close

Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at Central Park South

"I have been trying to hold things alone," I say to the round ones, out loud, though I had not planned to, though it is the kind of thing a keeper is not supposed to say to the cast. "Not the curtain. The curtain I know is not mine to hold alone; the curtain holds itself, mostly; I only keep it. But other things. The route. The responsibility. The worry the flower wall named. I have been carrying it the way you would carry the whole curtain by yourself — bracing under all of it, all the time, certain that if I set down even my own small part the whole thing would fall. I forgot to stand close. I forgot there were others holding."

"There are always others holding," the round ones say, gently, all hundred of them, not pausing in their holding to say it, holding and speaking at once because the holding is easy, the holding is shared, the holding leaves them plenty of breath for kindness. "That is the thing the lonely forget and the close remember. You are not the only keeper the island has ever had. You will not be the last. And even now, today, you are not holding the route alone — the curtain holds its part, and the cast holds theirs, and every building you have woken holds the part you woke in it, and the mirror-pool holds the memory, and we hold the hem. You only feel alone because you have your back to us, facing up the island, watching for the

next stop. Turn around once in a while. See how many of us are holding. Then your part will be light too, the way ours is light, because shared weight is light and that is not a metaphor, it is simply the truth about weight, the plainest physics there is."

I want to dwell another moment on the cheerfulness of the round ones, because it is easy to miss and it is everything. When I asked if the curtain was heavy, they did not say no. They did not pretend the weight away or perform a brave lightness they did not feel. They said yes — yes, it is heavy, it is the heaviest thing on the island — and they said it cheerfully, and the cheer was not in spite of the weight but because of how the weight was carried. This is a distinction the lonely strong can never quite believe: that you can fully admit a thing is heavy and still bear it cheerfully, provided you are not bearing it alone. The tall ones, bearing their dignity alone, could not be cheerful about it; the weight of never-falling made them magnificent and grim. The round ones, bearing a far greater weight together, are light-hearted under it, literally light-hearted, because the heaviness is real and admitted and shared, and a real heavy thing shared among the close is somehow lighter to each holder than a smaller thing borne alone.

The arithmetic of it does not work and is nonetheless true. A hundred small round figures holding the largest curtain in the world should each bear a hundredth of an enormous weight, which is still, you would think, a considerable weight for so small a holder. But that is vessel-arithmetic, subtraction-arithmetic, the math of finite stores. The actual arithmetic of shared holding is stranger and kinder: when you hold your part while standing close to others holding theirs, your part becomes lighter than its fraction, because part of what made it heavy was the fear of holding it alone, and that fear — which weighs more than the curtain — is precisely the part that the closeness removes. The round ones are not each holding a hundredth of the weight. They are each holding their small part minus the entire crushing weight of aloneness, which is subtracted not once but for every holder, by the simple fact of the others being right there, shoulder to shoulder, also holding. That is why they can be cheerful. They have set down the heaviest thing — the aloneness — and kept only the curtain, which, alone, is almost nothing, which is light enough to smile under, which a hundred small glad close-standing selves can hold up easily over the whole green forever.

The green breathes out. The city breathes in. The hem stays up, easily, impossibly, on a hundred small willing shoulders, and through the held-open gap the stone and the leaf regard each other, the built island and the grown island, two halves of one place that spend most of their lives with a hem between them, finally and clearly seeing each other across the open green. And I understand, sitting there, that this is how the whole island has been carrying its joy the entire time, all the way up from the Battery — not by any single thing being strong enough, because no single thing is strong enough, the joy is too heavy for that — but by everything holding its own part and standing close. I simply had never seen the

shoulders before. They were always there, under everything, the hundred small holders. The round ones at Central Park South only made them visible, stood them in a row where a keeper with his back too long to the others could finally turn around and see: you are not holding it alone; you were never holding it alone; turn around; we are all right here; hold your part and stand close and let the rest of us hold the rest. We stay until I have truly seen it, not just heard it. The curtain, held aloft by the round ones, is in no hurry; it never is; and the round ones do not tire, because they are not holding it alone. When at last we go, I walk differently. I hold my part and I know the others are holding theirs, and the broom on my shoulder is lighter than it has been since the Battery, and I turn around, once, to wave at the long smiling row of holders, and all hundred of them — still holding, easily — smile back. Two stops to go. The light is gold and getting long.

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13. The Reflection Learns Its Name

THE UPPER WEST SIDE

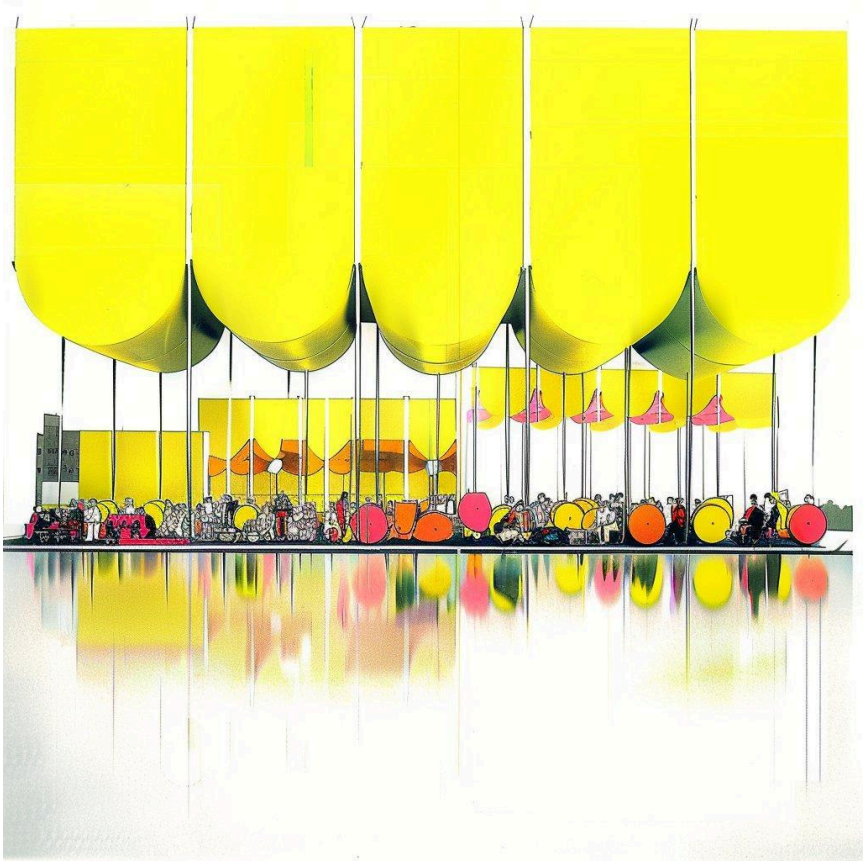


Plate 13

On the Upper West Side the light goes entirely to gold. It is late in the day now; we have come a long way up the island; the morning's silver harbor is hours and miles behind us; and the sun, dropping toward the Hudson on our left, comes in low and long and the particular deep gold of late afternoon near water, the gold that makes every ordinary thing look like it is remembering being precious. And the curtain, when it stops here and lifts its hem, casts the longest reflection of the whole journey — the entire bright cast doubled in the mirror-pool below, the small red letters and the gold circles and the pink one and the green one and all of them, hanging upside down in the still gold water, perfect, patient, an entire second performance given silently and completely to the ground.

I have always loved the mirror-pool. I should have told you about it properly before now; it has been at the foot of every stop, the still bright shallow water that gathers under the curtain wherever it pauses, holding the doubled image of each scene; I have swept it clean each morning and watched it catch each performance; and I had thought of it, all this time, as only a reflection. A copy. A lesser echo of the real scene above — pretty, yes, but

secondary, the way a shadow is secondary to the thing that casts it, the way a recording is secondary to the song. I had been a little condescending toward the mirror-pool, if I am honest, the gentle condescension we reserve for things we believe are merely copies of realer things.

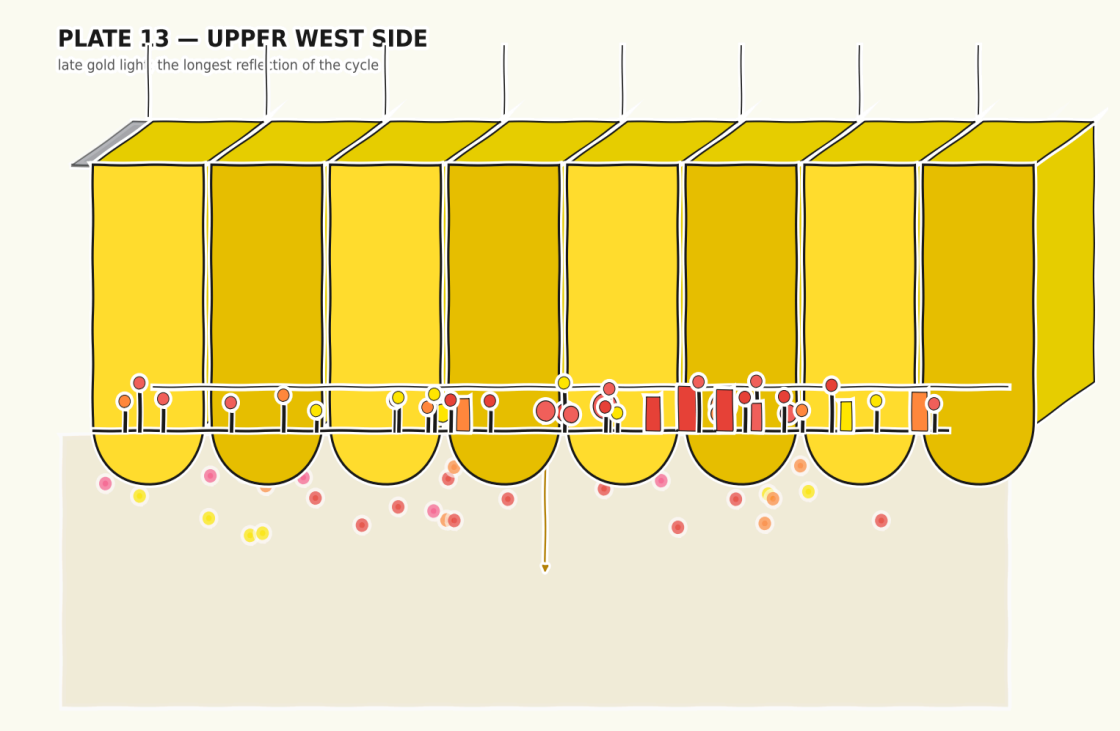
The Upper West Side corrected me. It is a thoughtful neighborhood, the Upper West Side — full of people who have read a great deal and thought about it longer, full of old apartments where the same families have wondered about the same questions for generations, full of a particular evening quality of attention — and it corrected me gently but completely, the way the most thoughtful corrections come, leaving me grateful rather than ashamed to have been wrong.

“The reflection is not the copy,” says a tall calm building, gold in the low light, its windows full of the dropping sun. “That is the thing you have had backwards, keeper, all this time, sweeping us clean each morning and thinking us secondary. Look again. Up there — ” and it means the scene above, the cast under the lifted hem “— up there is the performance. And a performance lasts only as long as it lasts. It is happening and then it is over; it is made of time; it cannot be kept; the moment it is finished it is gone, the way every live thing is gone the moment it is finished. But down there — ” and it means the mirror-pool, the gold doubled scene in the still water “— down there is not a copy of the performance. Down there is the city's memory of it. The keeping. The part that lasts. Up there is the day. Down there is how the day is remembered, and a thing's memory of its joy is not less real than the joy; it is how the joy survives its own ending; it is the only way anything bright is ever kept past the moment of its brightness.”

And I look down into the mirror-pool, into the long gold doubled scene — really look, the way I have not looked in all my mornings of incurious sweeping — and I see, for the first time, that I am in it. Of course I am in it. I am at every stop; the keeper is part of every scene; and so the keeper is in every reflection, has been in every reflection, all the way up the island. But I had never looked. I had swept the pool and tended the pool and thought of the pool as a copy of the realer world above, and I had never once looked down into it long enough to find my own face there — small, with the broom, the curtain-keeper — doubled and gold and kept, held in the city's memory along with everything else I have spent the day framing and giving away.

“Oh,” I say — and it is my turn, finally, to say the island's great syllable, the “oh” the tower said and the square said and the wedge said and Times Square said, the “oh” of a self rearranging in a single breath. Because I had thought, all this time, that I was the one outside the scene. The keeper. The framer. The one who stands at the edge with the broom and makes the joy visible for everyone else and is not, himself, part of the joy — the way you might think the person holding the camera is not in the photograph. I had built my whole

understanding of myself around being the one who keeps the play and is not in it. And the mirror-pool, in the long gold light of the thoughtful Upper West Side, showed me my own doubled face among the cast and told me, without a word, the way it tells everything without a word: you were in it the whole time. You were never outside. The keeper is not the one who stands apart from the play. The keeper is a part of the play that happens to carry a broom. You have been performing your own scene — the scene of the keeper, the small faithful one who wakes the curtain and oils the track and frames the joy and worries about running dry — at every single stop, and the pool has been keeping it, doubling it, remembering it, all the way up the island, the same as it keeps every other scene. You are not the witness to the play. You are in the play. You always were.



Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at The Upper West Side

"The pool has my name," I say, slowly, working it out as I say it. "It has been collecting me. At every stop. All day. The same as it collects the towers and the doodles and the bicycles. I thought I was the one doing the keeping. But the pool has been keeping me too, this whole time, remembering the keeper along with everything the keeper framed."

"Everyone who is part of the play is kept," the tall gold building says, gently. "And everyone is part of the play. That is the thing the pool knows that the performers above forget. Up in the performance it is easy to believe there are players and watchers, framers and framed, the ones in the scene and the ones who keep it. But down in the memory, in the gold still water, those distinctions wash out. The pool does not remember a keeper standing apart from a cast. It remembers a scene with a keeper in it. To the memory of the city, you

were always simply one more of the beloved bright things under the yellow. You can stop standing apart now. You were never really apart. You only thought you were, the way the camera-holder thinks they are not in the day they are photographing, when of course they are the most present person there, the one who came to keep it precisely because they loved it most."

I sit at the edge of the mirror-pool a long time in the gold light, looking at my own kept doubled face among the faces of the cast, and something I did not know I had been holding apart from — the whole long loneliness of being the keeper, the one who gives the joy and stands outside it, the camera-holder's loneliness, the channel's worry that the flower wall already began to heal — something in me sits down beside the rest of the cast at last and stops standing apart. I am in the play. I am kept. I was never only framing the joy; I was always also one of the joys being framed; the pool knew it before I did and held my face among the others all the way up the island, waiting, patient, gold, for the evening I would finally look down and find myself there and learn my own name as the city had been saying it all along: not keeper-who-stands-apart, but simply one-of-us, one of the bright kept things, beloved and doubled and remembered, in the play, in the play, in the play.

I have swept the mirror-pool ten thousand times and I want to tell you what it is actually like to tend it, now that I know it is the city's memory and not a copy, because the knowing changed the sweeping entirely. Before, when I thought the pool was only a reflection, sweeping it felt like tidying a shadow — necessary, I supposed, but secondary, a housekeeping of the unreal. I swept the leaves and the dust off the still bright surface the way you wipe a mirror, with no sense that I was tending anything that mattered in itself. But once the Upper West Side taught me that the pool is the keeping, the part that lasts, the city's actual memory of its own joy — sweeping it became the most important thing I do all day, more important even than waking the curtain, because the curtain makes the joy happen and the pool is what lets the joy survive its own happening, and a joy that is not kept might as well not have happened, which is the saddest sentence I know and the reason memory is sacred.

So now I sweep the mirror-pool the way you would dust something precious that has been entrusted to you — a memorial, an heirloom, the kept things of people who are gone. Each morning I clear the surface so that the day's performances can be held cleanly, doubled truly, remembered without distortion. And I have come to think that this is the most honest description of what a keeper actually is, more honest than the broom and the keys and the knocking: a keeper is one who tends the memory. The curtain could almost run without me; it wakes itself, mostly; it knows its own route; the lifting and the lowering are its own. But the pool needs tending. The memory needs keeping clean. And so the keeper's truest work is not the bright daytime work of framing joy at all — that is the curtain's work, that I assist — but the quiet faithful work of making sure the joy, once framed, is remembered, kept,

doubled in still water and held past its own ending, so that nothing bright that happens on the island is ever lost merely because the moment of it has passed. The keeper keeps the memory. Everything else is the curtain's. I did not know that until the gold evening I found my own face in the pool I had been tending so incuriously, and learned that the keeper of the memory was, all along, also kept in it.

"Thank you," I say to the mirror-pool, which has never spoken in all my mornings and does not start now, because the mirror-pool does not speak; the buildings speak; the cast speaks; but the pool only ever keeps, silently, faithfully, the way the deepest things keep. It does not answer. But it holds my gold doubled face a moment longer than the plain physics of still water would strictly require — I have watched enough still water to know the difference — a moment longer, just slightly, just enough, which is the mirror-pool's only way of saying: you are welcome, and you are kept, and you were always part of the play, and now you know it, and now you can walk the last stretch to the green not as the lonely keeper who stands apart but as what you always were, one of the bright beloved things, going home with the others to the finale. We move toward the last stop. The light is honey. I am tired in the good way, the way you are tired after a day that was entirely worth it. One more stop. The whole island has been climbing toward it since the Battery, and so, I understand now, looking at my kept face in the gold water, have I.

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14. The Whole Island Sings

HARLEM & THE GREAT LAWN

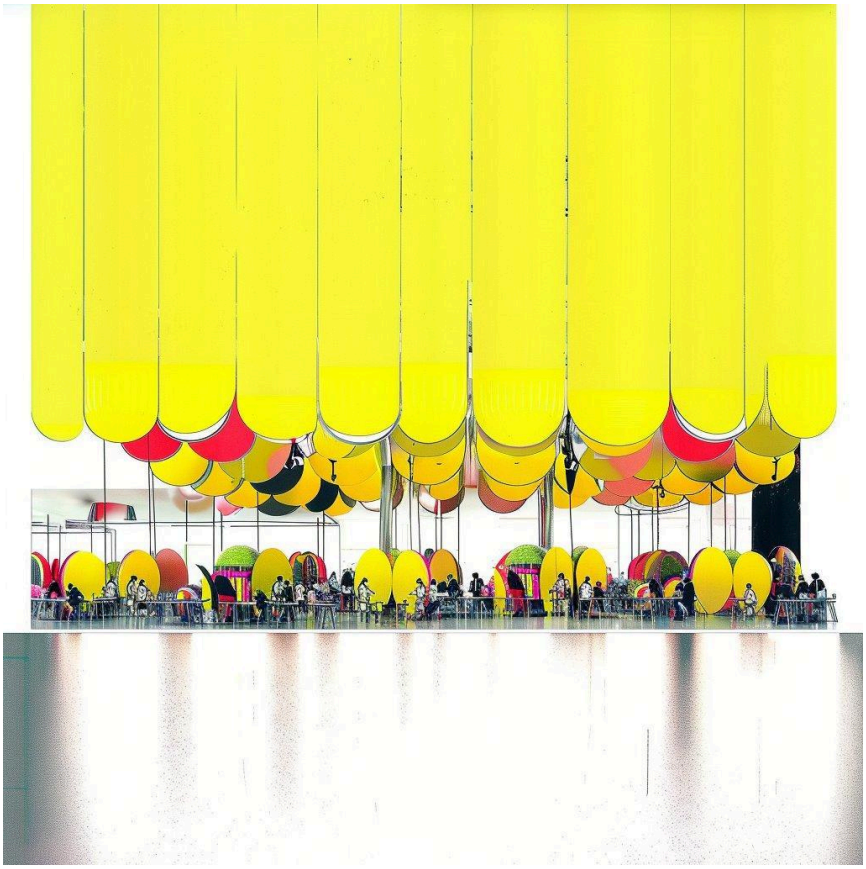

Plate 14

The last stop is the green itself — the great open lawn at the top of the park, with Harlem bright beyond it, the northern neighborhoods glowing in the last of the gold — and here the curtain does the thing it has been traveling all day to do, the thing the whole long walk from the harbor was only ever practice for. It does not stop and lift its hem at one more scene and then prepare to move on. There is no moving on from here; this is the top of the island; this is where the track ends and the green begins. So the curtain does not lift its hem. It opens. Completely. All its panels at once, the entire vast yellow length of it that has hung in single stops all day — the Battery's near-full drop, the canyon's high lift, the Village's sagging arches, the loud square's lowering, the giant letters, the two great round forms — all of it, every panel, flung wide open at the same moment over the whole green lawn, and every scene from the entire journey arrives at once.

They are all here. I want to name them, because they came all this way and they deserve their names spoken at the finale. The tall bowing ones from Wall Street, still bent, leaning now not in shame but in greeting. The cast-iron children from Tribeca, rolling and spinning

and showing off, the small watermelon-red one among them no longer standing near but fully playing. The loose illegible doodles from SoHo, larger than ever, every one flourished and finished and unafraid. The singing arches from the Village, the framed song riding with them. The chiming square from Union Square, its bicycles looping, its grief turned wholly to keel. The sailing wedge from Flatiron, going joyfully nowhere, carrying its whole crew. The red-hearted square from Herald, its caution-stripes pointing now at all the places the life is densest. The quieted, deepened Times Square, loud again but with the pilot light of quiet burning steady inside the roar. The lanterns from Bryant Park, the whole bouquet of small warm suns. The blooming, flowing, never-emptied flower wall from Grand Central. The hundred small round holders from Central Park South, who have set down their part of the hem at last — because here the curtain holds itself open, here no one has to hold it, here it is finally easy for everyone all at once. The whole island. Every wakened building, every bright small member of the cast, the mirror-pool's whole kept memory of the day risen up and gathered — all of them, on the one green lawn, under the one wide-open yellow. And they are singing.

Not one song. I want to be exact about this, because it is the heart of the finale and the heart of the whole book and very nearly the heart of everything I have learned in all my mornings as a keeper. It would be easy, and wrong, to say that at the finale the whole island joins in one great song together. They do not. They never could; they are far too different; the tall ones' deep slow bow-song could never be the same song as the doodles' fast scribbling cheer, and the quieted square's whispered pilot-light hum could never be the bicycles' bright chime, and the flower wall's hundred-million-footstep murmur could never be the cast-iron children's thrown-open-window clatter. Each one is singing its own scene. Its own discovered joy. Its own particular thing that it learned, this day, under the yellow — the bow and the play and the loosed line and the framed song and the chime and the joyful deck and the revealed red heart and the brave whisper and the lantern and the flowing bloom and the shared holding and the kept reflection — all of it, all at once, all together, every voice singing its own different song.

And it does not clash.

That is the miracle. That is the whole miracle, the one the entire route has been building toward since the silver morning at the Battery. A hundred different songs, every one of them different, sung all at once over a single green lawn — and it does not clash, it does not become noise, it does not become the grey wall of sound the Village taught us the city usually makes. It becomes one song. One enormous song made entirely of different songs, not one of them surrendered, not one of them flattened to match the others, every single voice singing its own true different thing — and the whole is somehow, impossibly, beautifully, a single piece of music. Because the curtain has spent the entire day teaching the island the one thing the Village first told me under its middle arch: the sounds only clash

when no one has framed them. And now the widest frame of all is open. The whole yellow length of the curtain, flung wide over the entire green, is one vast frame around every voice on the island at once — and inside a frame that wide, that generous, that complete, nothing clashes, because clashing was never about the sounds being different. The sounds were always different. Clashing was only ever about the sounds being unframed, unheld, unwitnessed, going to waste for lack of an edge of attention around them. Frame them all at once, hold them all together, witness every different voice as part of one deliberate whole — and the difference stops being discord and becomes, all at once, harmony. The same difference. The same voices. Only now they are framed, and so now they are music, and that is the only thing that ever had to change.

"Was this always possible," asks the green lawn, who is new to all of this, who has only ever been grass, who has spent its whole flat green life being walked on and lain on and played on and has never once, until this evening, been asked to be the stage for the whole island's single song. Its voice is the softest on the island, a green whisper, the sound of a great field of grass leaning all one way in an evening wind. "All of it? The whole island, singing together without clashing, every different voice one music? Was that always possible, this whole time, or did the curtain make it possible today?"

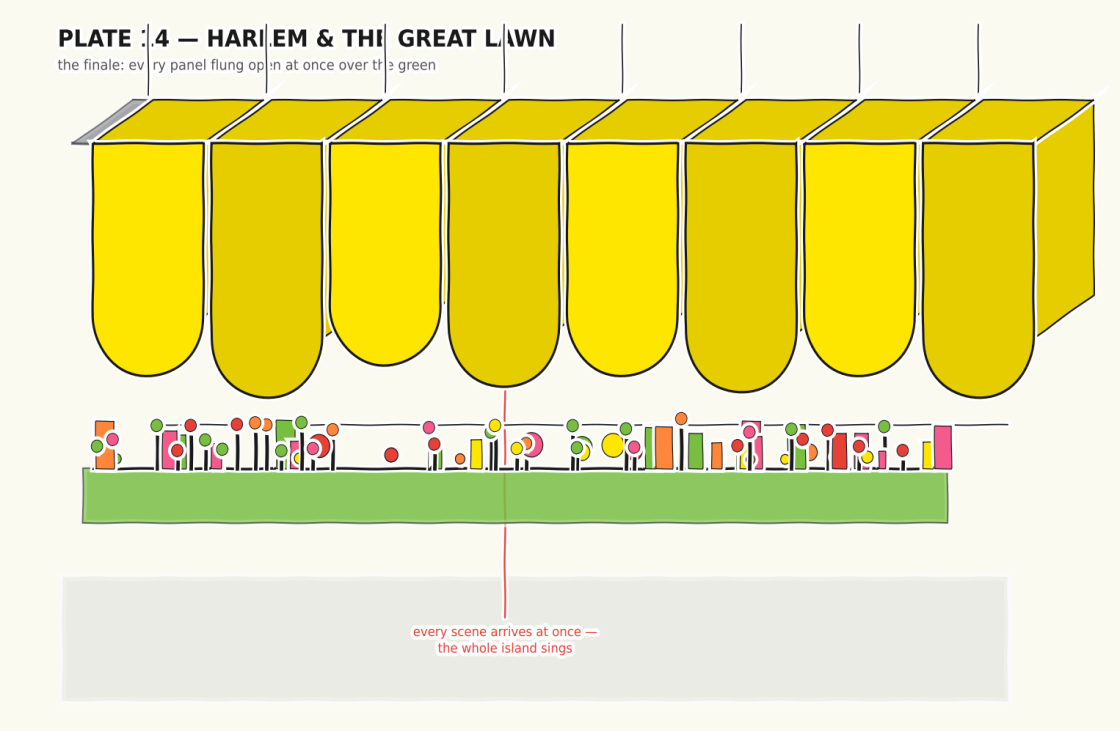
PLATE 4 — HARLEM & THE GREAT LAWN
the finale: every panel flung open at once over the green
every scene arrives at once —
the whole island sings

Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at Harlem & the Great Lawn

"Always," I tell the green lawn, and I am certain of it now, more certain than I have been of anything, because I have walked the whole length of the proof. "It was always possible. The curtain did not make it possible. The curtain only made it happen. The difference

between those two things is the difference the whole day has been about. Every voice you hear was always able to sing its own true song. Every building was always able to bow or bloom or whisper or play. The joy was always already here, scattered across the whole island, in every neighborhood, going to waste for lack of a frame. The curtain added nothing. It only framed what was already true, stop by stop, all the way up, and then opened the widest frame of all over all of it at once, here, on you, on the green at the top of the island — and what was always possible finally, for one gold evening, actually happened."

"Then it can happen again," says the green lawn, working it out the way the green figure in the Village worked it out, the way the doodle's loops sped up. "If the curtain only frames what was already true — then the truth is still here tomorrow, when the curtain has gone back down to the harbor. The voices are still here. The joy is still here. It is only the frame that leaves. So anyone who learned, today, to frame it — anyone who learned to hold an edge of attention around the scattered joy and hear it as the song it always was — they could make it happen again. Without the curtain. Couldn't they?"

"That," I say, and my whole heart is in it, "is the only thing the curtain has ever been trying to teach. Yes. Anyone who learned, today, can make it happen again. The curtain is not the joy. The curtain is the teacher of the framing. And a teacher's whole hope is to become unnecessary — to teach the thing so well that the student can do it alone, or rather, never alone, but without the teacher, holding their own part, standing close to the others. Every building we woke today, every member of the cast, every real person who looked up in the canyon or stood in the lantern-light or felt the bloom ride out of Grand Central on their hurrying shoulders — every one of them learned, a little, to frame the joy. And a few of them learned it deeply. And a few is enough. A few, in each neighborhood, keep the song going long after the yellow has moved on. That is the whole plan. That was always the whole plan. The curtain walks the island teaching it to sing, so that one day the island can sing without the curtain."

I stand at the edge of the great green lawn with my broom and my ring of keys, and I watch the whole island sing — every scene of the whole day returned and singing its own different song into the one wide-open frame — and the mirror-pool below the lawn holds all of it, the entire day, doubled and gold and kept, my own small face among the cast, in the play, kept like everything else. And I think about tomorrow. Because there is a tomorrow; there is always a tomorrow; that is not the sad part, though it could be mistaken for the sad part. Tomorrow I will walk back down the whole length of the island to the Battery, to the green at the bottom where the curtain sleeps, and I will knock three times on the lowest panel, and I will say good morning, and I will wait the breath of wondering, and the curtain will wake, and we will do it all again. The same. And completely different. Because the play has no ending. It cannot have an ending. An ending is for things that are made of time, like a single performance, and the play is not a single performance; the play is the island being

alive; and the island does not end, it only goes around again, the same and different, the curtain walking up and sleeping down and walking up again, teaching the song over and over to new ears, keeping it alive in the few who learn it deeply, world without ending.

And that is not a sadness. I need you to hear this, here at the end, in the gold light on the green lawn with the whole island singing. The no-ending is not a sadness. It is the best news there has ever been. It means the grey mornings will keep coming — yes, they will, I will not lie to you, the grey mornings always keep coming, for the island and for the keeper and for you — and it means that every single one of them, without exception, forever, there will be a curtain at the bottom of the island ready to be woken, and a keeper to wake it, and a whole route of neighborhoods waiting to be taught again that their scattered joy was always a song. The grey mornings keep coming and so does the yellow. That is the deal. That is the whole deal, and it is a good deal, the best deal, and I would not trade it for a world with no grey mornings, because a world with no grey mornings would be a world with no need for yellow, and I have given my whole small life to the yellow and I do not regret one morning of it.

So here is the last thing, and I am saying it to you now, directly, the way the flower wall spoke directly to me — putting down the story for one moment to speak past it, to the actual you, holding this actual yellow book. I know about your grey morning. Not the specific grey of it; I do not know your particular weather; but I know that you have them, because everyone does, because the grey mornings keep coming for everyone, that is simply the condition of the thing. And I know that you are holding this yellow book against one of them right now, or will be soon, or were recently — holding something yellow up between yourself and the grey, and choosing, the way I taught the whole island to choose, the way the very first square of lemon-colored paper taught me to choose, to look through the warm thing at the world. You are doing it right now. That is what reading this is. You are holding up the yellow. And the grey morning behind it has not changed at all — I cannot change your grey morning, no book can, the curtain itself could not change a single grey morning, it never once tried to — but the looking has changed, because you put something yellow between yourself and the grey and chose to look through it, and the looking was always the part that could change, the only part, the whole part. So look. The curtain is already moving back down toward the harbor to sleep, so that it can wake tomorrow and climb again. Up you get. There is a whole island in you waiting to be taught that its scattered joy was always a song, and you do not need a mile of yellow cloth to teach it, you only need to hold an edge of attention around the joy you already have and hear it, finally, as the music it has been the whole time. Mind the cables. Here is the first stop, again, for the first time. Good morning. Where today? Up. All the way up. The whole island, the long way, the way that takes all day.

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Afterword

People ask me whether the curtain is real, and I always say yes, and they always think I am being whimsical, and I am not.

The curtain is as real as choosing to look through yellow on a grey morning, which is to say: it is exactly as real as you decide to make it, and that turns out to be very real indeed. I cannot hang an actual mile of yellow over Manhattan. But I can build it so completely — model every panel, render every cable, give every building its bow and its blush and its quiet — that when you have walked the whole length of it with me, something in you has hung it for real, in the only place it was ever meant to hang, which is in the way you walk out your own front door tomorrow.

That is the gift I am trying to hand you, the way someone once handed it to me from a studio wall. Not a story about a happy city. The actual capacity to find the city you are already in to be alive, and bowing, and blushing, and holding up something enormous on a hundred small willing shoulders, and singing its own scene under the widest frame you are willing to open over it. The buildings really do speak to one another. You have simply been too hurried, until now, to frame the conversation and hear it as the song it is.

Everyone in this book is genderqueer and non-binary because everyone in this book is permitted to be exactly and abundantly themselves, and I wanted a world where that permission was so total it had soaked into the architecture, into the curtain, into the light. I am that world's author and one of its citizens both. I made the pictures with my own hands and my own software and no machine dreaming in my place, and I made the words alongside a patient artificial co-author, and I am the creator of the whole context, and I am telling you all of this plainly because radical joy has nothing to hide, least of all how it was made.

Walk up the island. Take all day. Mind the cables. And when you reach the green at the top and the whole place opens into song, do me one kindness: look down into the mirror-pool, and find your own small face among the cast, kept and doubled and gold — because you were never only reading this. You were in it the whole time. You were always part of the play.

I built the images the slow way, and I want to describe the slowness, because the slowness is part of what I am trying to give you. Each plate began as a three-dimensional model, built by hand in Rhino, panel by panel and figure by figure — the curtain modeled as an actual hanging thing with actual weight, so that its hem would fall the way real heavy cloth falls; the cast placed one at a time; the mirror-pool given a real reflective surface so that the doubling in the water is a true optical doubling and not a painted trick. Then I lit each scene and rendered it, which is its own slow craft, waiting while the light is calculated

bounce by bounce. No part of this was generated for me by a machine dreaming on my behalf. I say this not to claim virtue but to claim the work, because the work is the love, and I would not want you to mistake a year of deliberate making for a moment of automatic conjuring. The curtain hangs the way it hangs because I hung it. The light is warm because I warmed it. When you look through the yellow, you are looking through a yellow that someone chose, on purpose, for you.

The words, as I said at the beginning, were made differently — written in conversation with an artificial intelligence, a patient co-author who never tired and never took the pen entirely — and I have been asked whether that undercuts the honesty of a book so concerned with the handmade. I have decided it does not, provided I am plain about it, which I am being. The voice is mine. The city is mine. The cast, the keeper, the insistence on joy, the central claim that the joy was always already there and only wanted framing — all mine, argued for and shaped over many drafts. What I shared was the labor of sentences, and I think there is no shame in sharing the labor of sentences with a patient collaborator, so long as you do not pretend you wrote alone when you did not. I am the author. I am the creator of the context. The intelligence helped me find the words for what was already, unmistakably, mine to say. That is the honest account, and honesty, in a book about lifting your hem to show the warm red underneath, seemed the only possible way to write the part about how it was made.

One last thing, and then I will let you go up the island. People sometimes ask me whether I worry that a book this committed to joy is naive — whether, in a world with as much grey in it as ours has, all this yellow is a kind of looking-away, a refusal to see the hard things clearly. I have thought about this more than about any other criticism, because it is the one I would level myself if I were not careful, and here is my answer. The book does not look away from the grey. The keeper says it plainly, again and again, all the way up the island and especially at the end: the grey mornings keep coming. They keep coming for the island and for the keeper and for you. The book never once pretends otherwise. What the book refuses is not the grey but the conclusion that the grey is the only thing worth seeing clearly. You can see the grey morning with perfect clarity and still choose to hold something yellow up between yourself and it, and look through the yellow, and the looking-through is not a denial of the grey — the grey is right there, unchanged, behind the yellow — it is only a decision about what to do with a morning you did not choose and cannot change. That is not naivety. Naivety is not knowing about the grey. This is knowing about the grey, all of it, and choosing the yellow anyway, on purpose, every single morning, forever. I think that choice is the least naive thing a person can do. I think it might be the bravest. I have given my book to teaching it, and I give the book, now, to you.

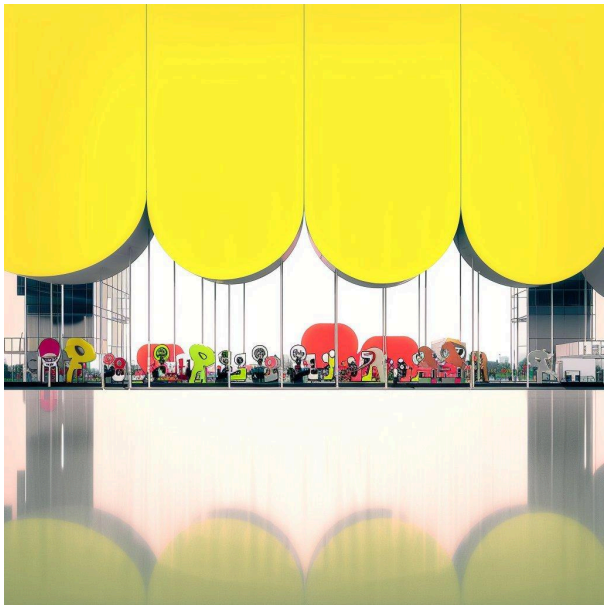
— Surjan

Catalogue of Plates

Fourteen plates, presented in the order of the curtain's ascent up Manhattan, south to north. Each was conceived, modeled in three dimensions, and rendered by the author; each is accompanied by its own elevation-oblique diagram, drawn to show how the curtain hangs at that particular stop. Media: digital 3D model (Rhino), rendered; 1:1 square format.

Plate 1. The Curtain Wakes

The Battery



The apparatus at rest in the harbor green, hem lifted a hand's width to reveal the full cast in a single bright row. Note the colossal scalloped panels at near-full drop and the mirror-pool already gathering the morning.

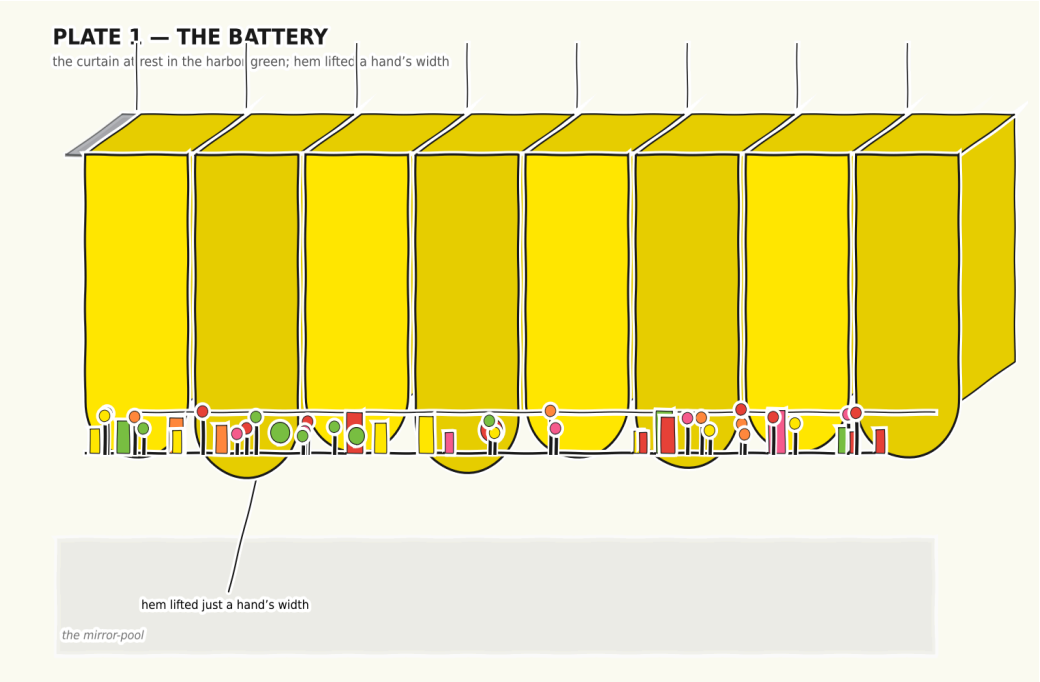
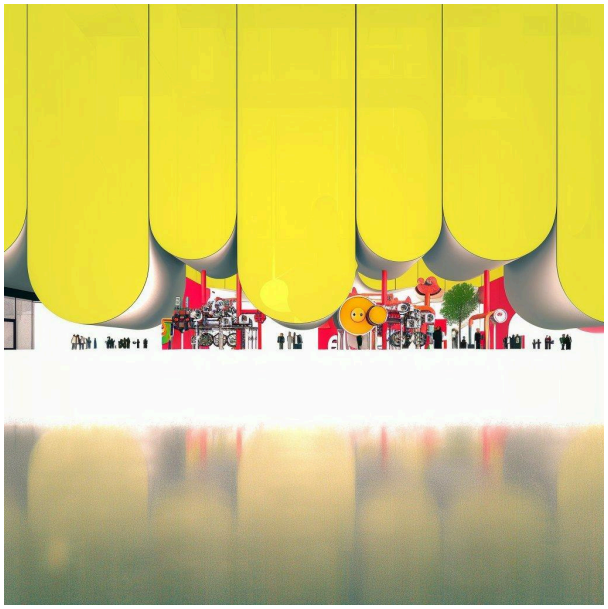


PLATE 1 — THE BATTERY
the curtain at rest in the harbor green; hem lifted a hand's width
hem lifted just a hand's width
the mirror-pool

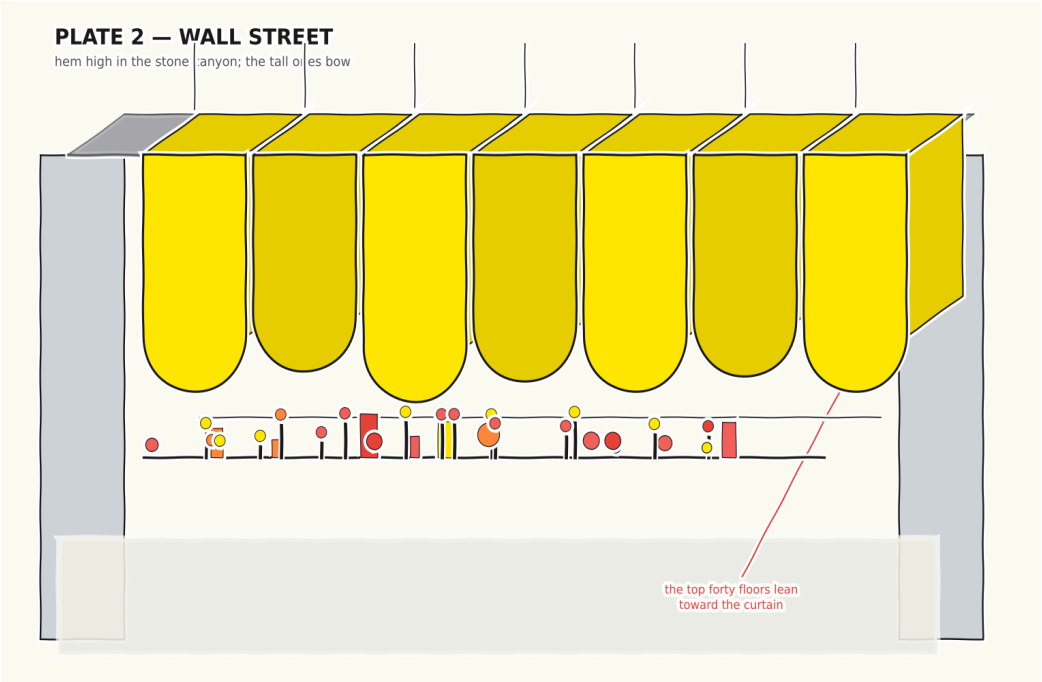
Elevation oblique, Plate 1

Plate 2. The Tall Ones Bow

Wall Street / Financial District



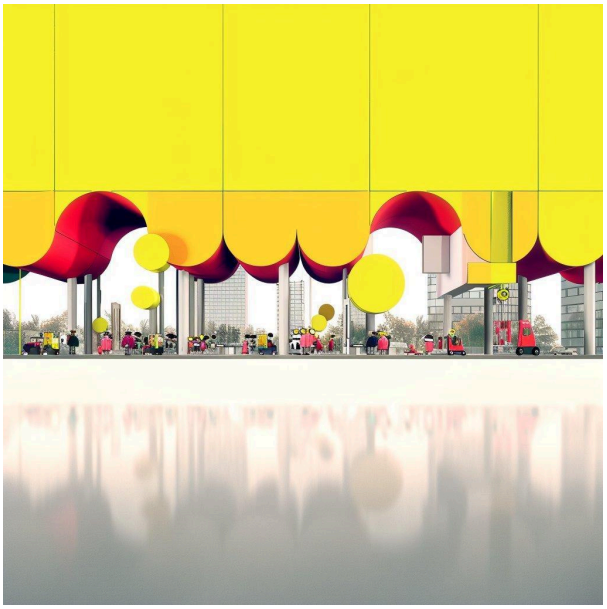
The curtain in the stone canyon, hem high over the machines and dark-coated crowds. A single orange disc rolls at center — the coin that decided to be a sun.



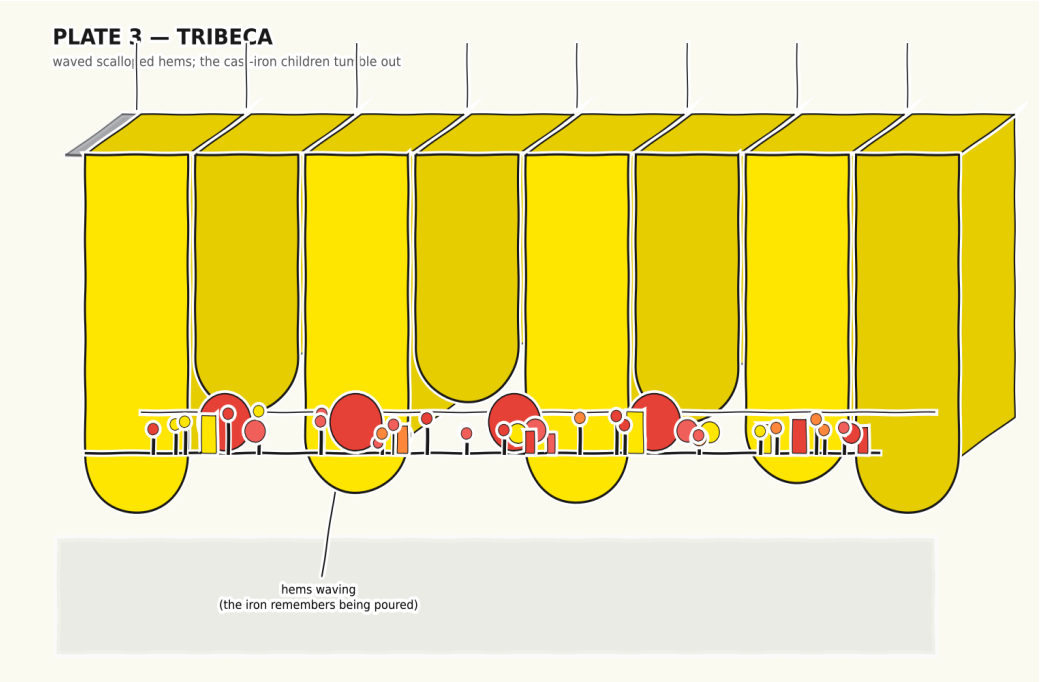
Elevation oblique, Plate 2

Plate 3. The Cast-Iron Children

Tribeca



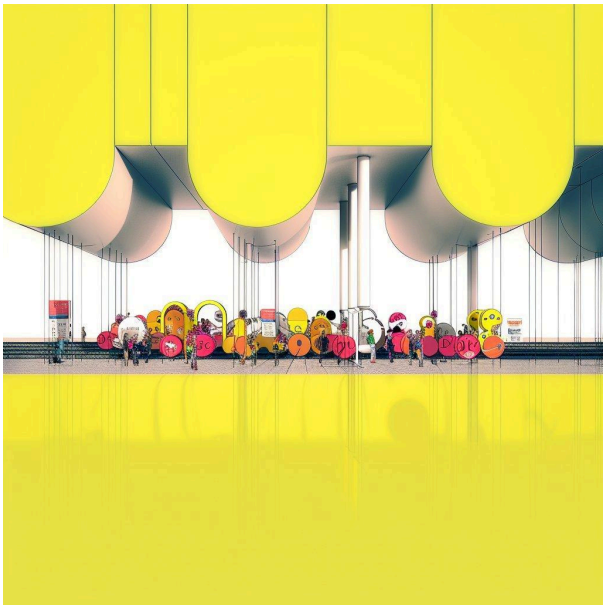
Cherry-red and butter-yellow forms tumble forward beneath waved panels; spinning discs and small carts. The architecture remembers being poured and longs to play.



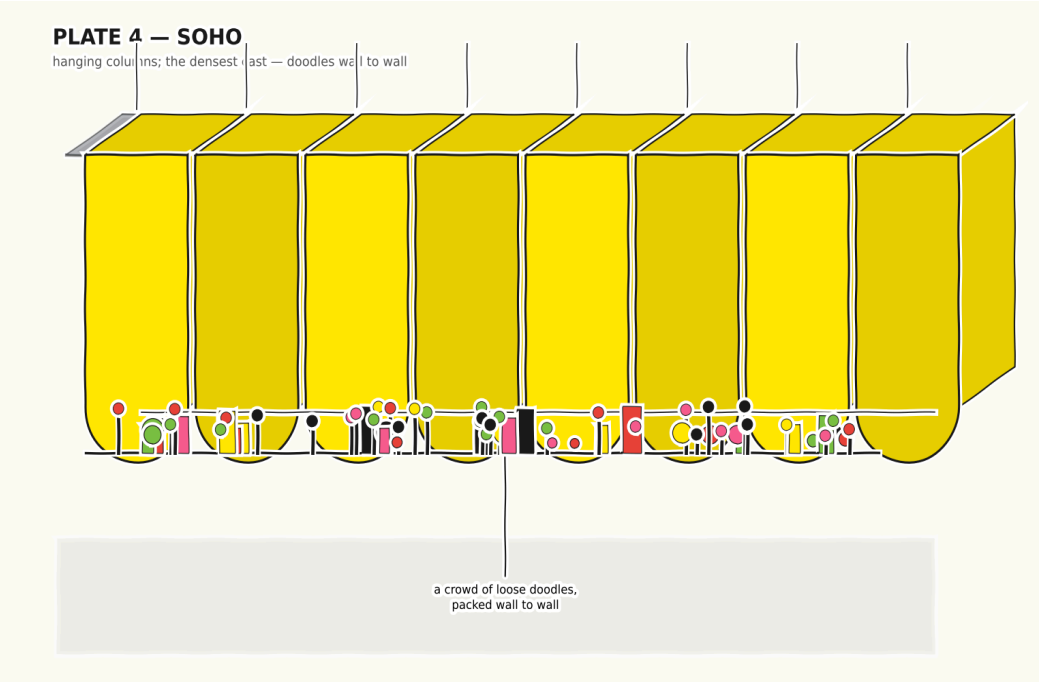
Elevation oblique, Plate 3

Plate 4. The Doodle That Got Loose

SoHo



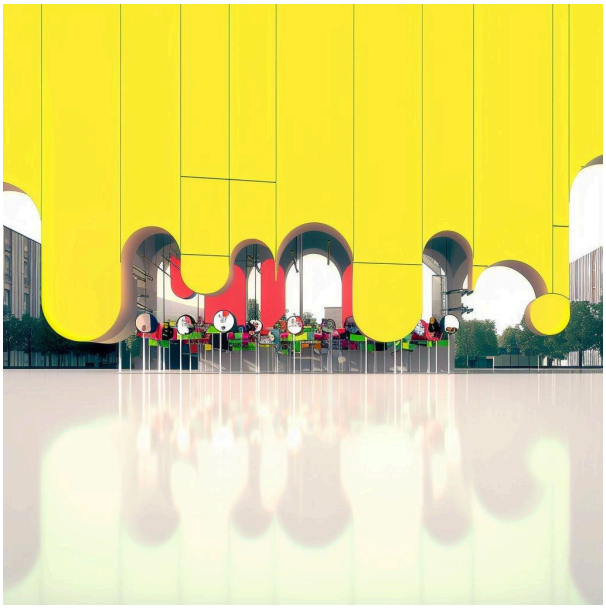
The densest cast in the cycle — a wall-to-wall crowd of looping ink-and-color creatures under hanging columns. The neighborhood writing itself larger.



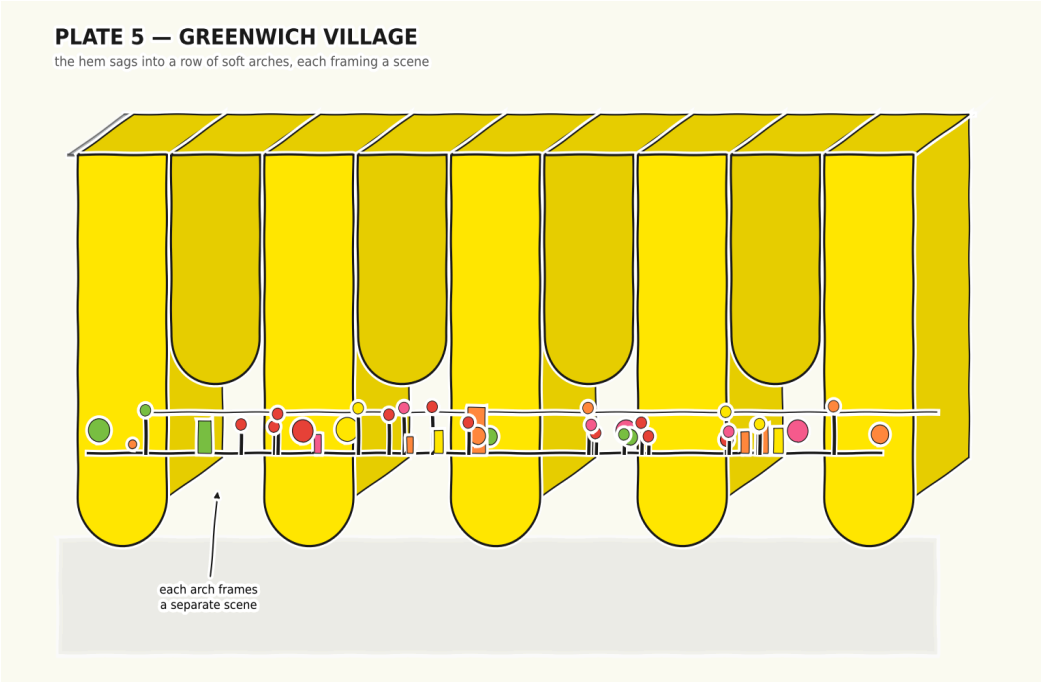
Elevation oblique, Plate 4

Plate 5. The Arches Learn to Sing

Greenwich Village



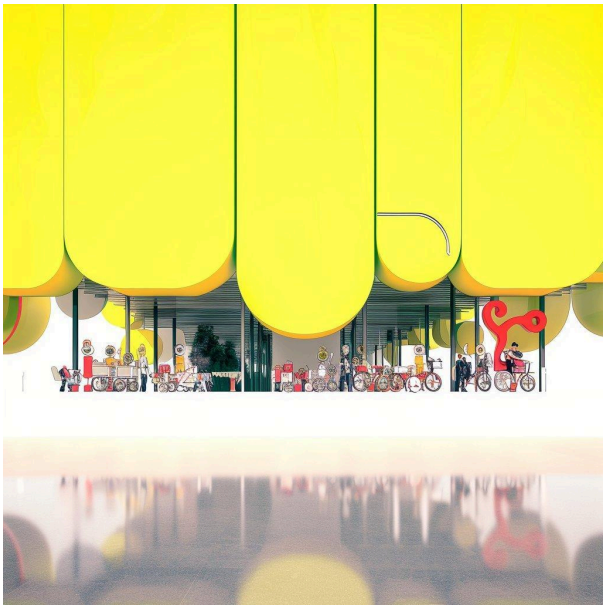
The hem sags into a row of soft scalloped arches, each framing a separate scene. Green and red clusters; the framed song of a low, kind, crooked quarter.



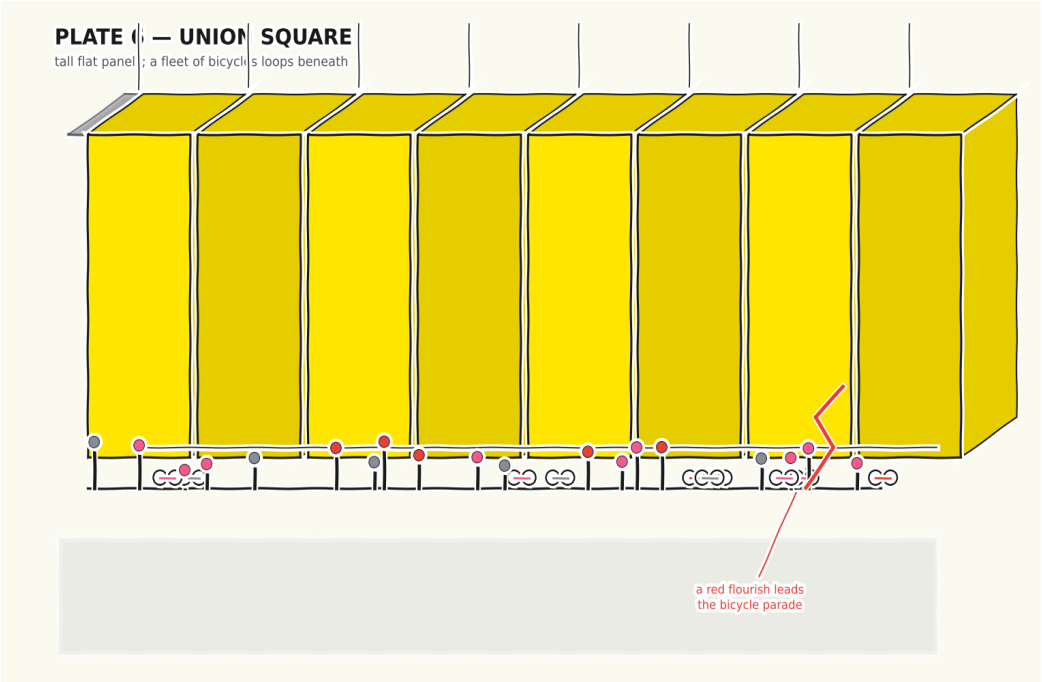
Elevation oblique, Plate 5

Plate 6. The Square That Remembered

Union Square



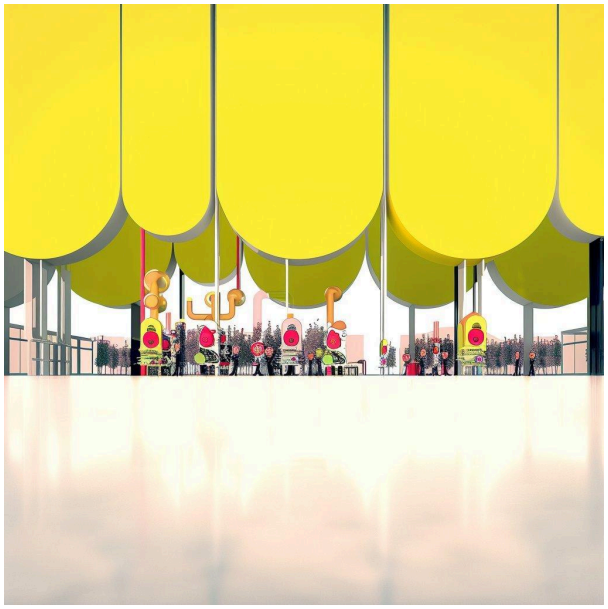
A red-framed fleet of bicycles loops beneath the yellow, led by a curling red flourish. Two centuries of gathering revealed as practice for moving freely together.



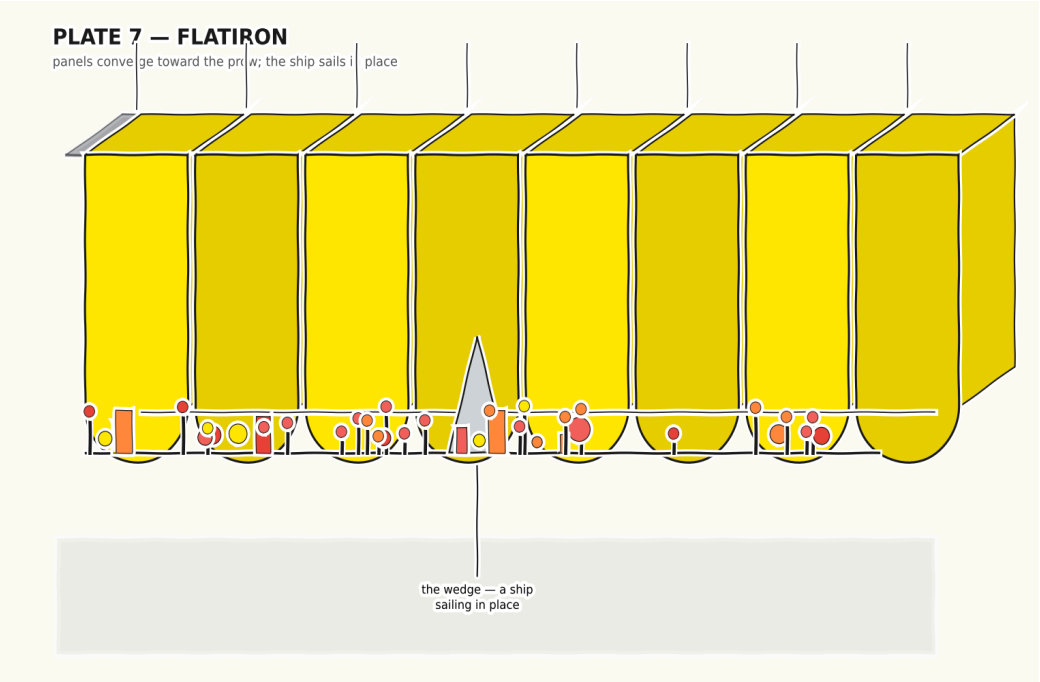
Elevation oblique, Plate 6

Plate 7. The Iron at the Crossroads

Flatiron / Madison Square



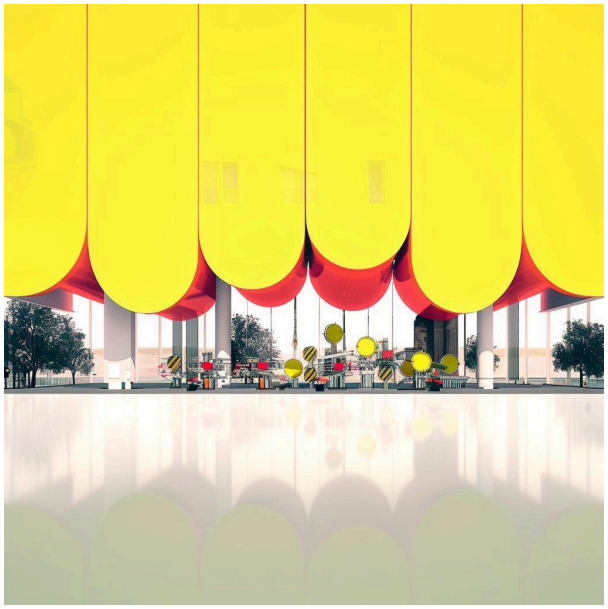
Brass-curl machines and round-faced figures crowd the triangular plaza at the prow. The ship that learns to sail in place, carrying everyone.



Elevation oblique, Plate 7

Plate 8. The Red Beneath the Yellow

Herald Square



The pivotal plate: the curtain lifts high enough to show its coral-red underside. Caution-striped discs reframed — warning colors as an invitation to attention. The curtain's heart, briefly public.

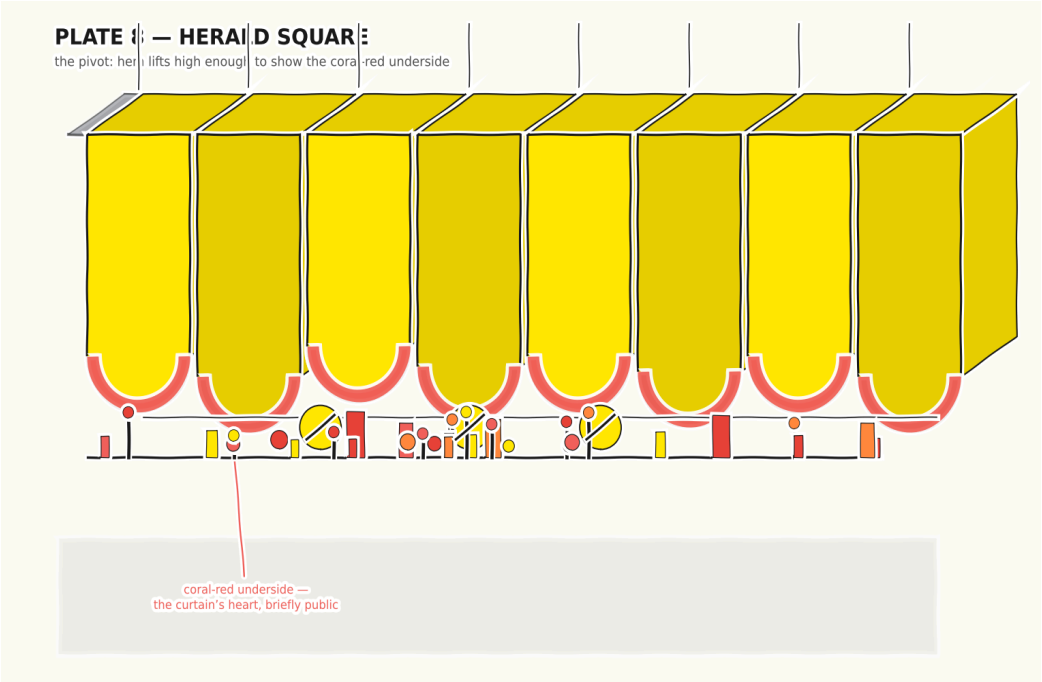
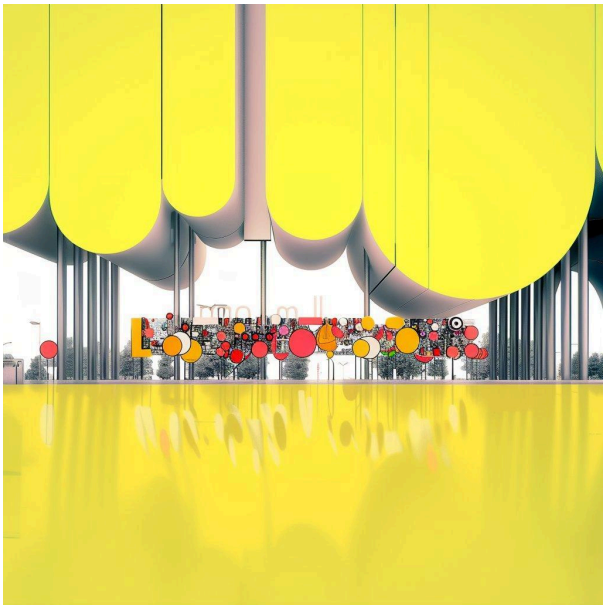


PLATE 8 — HERALD SQUARE
the pivot: her lifts high enough to show the coral-red underside
coral-red underside —
the curtain's heart, briefly public

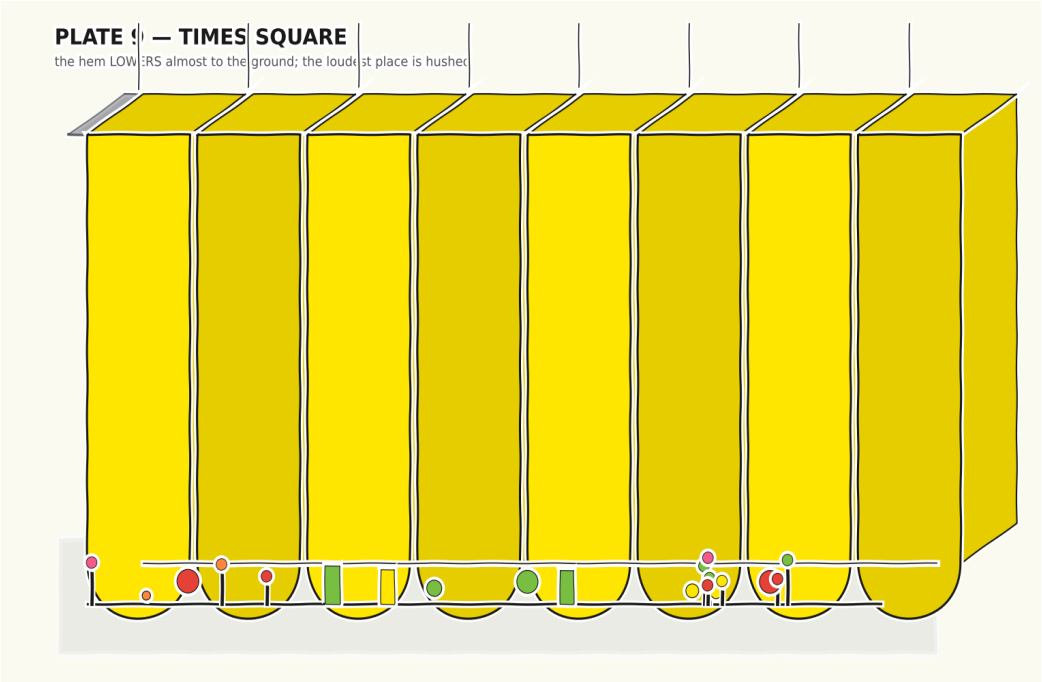
Elevation oblique, Plate 8

Plate 9. The Square That Was Already a Stage

Times Square



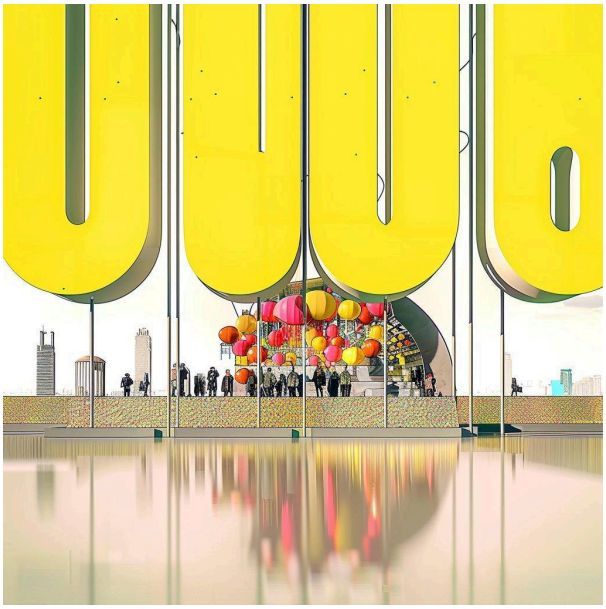
The hem lowers nearly to the ground, hushing the loudest place in the world. Scattered, unhurried figures in gentled yellow light. The whisper that is the truest thing it ever said.



Elevation oblique, Plate 9

Plate 10. The Garden Behind the Letters

Bryant Park / 42nd St



Four vast yellow letter-columns frame a bouquet of glowing paper lanterns — pink, orange, gold — above the gathered green. The library city taking its light down off the shelf.

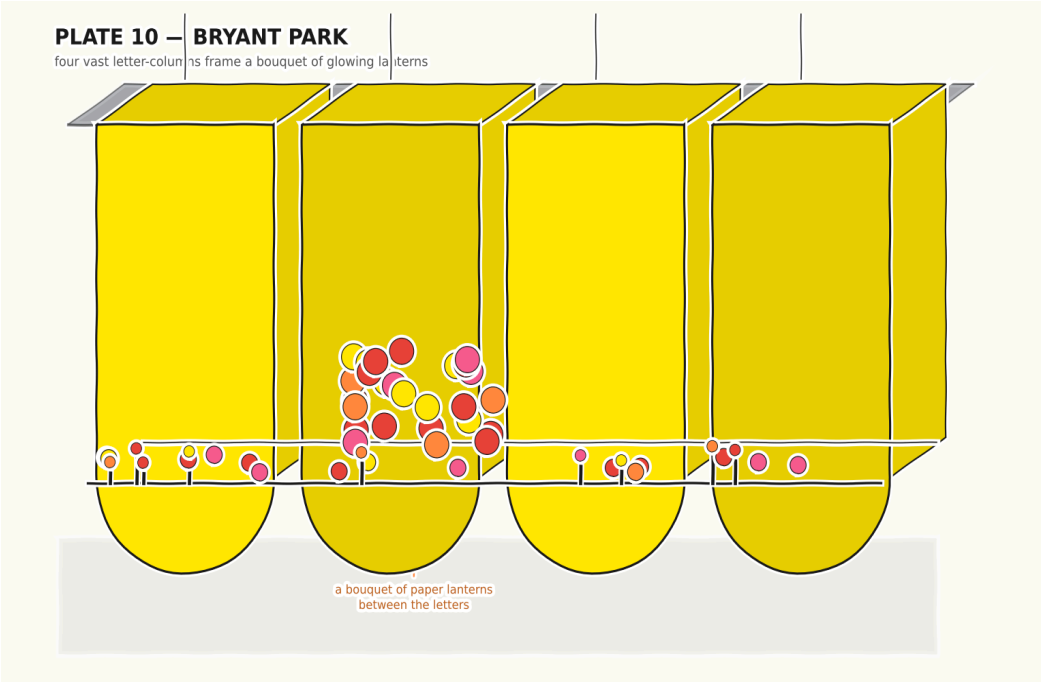
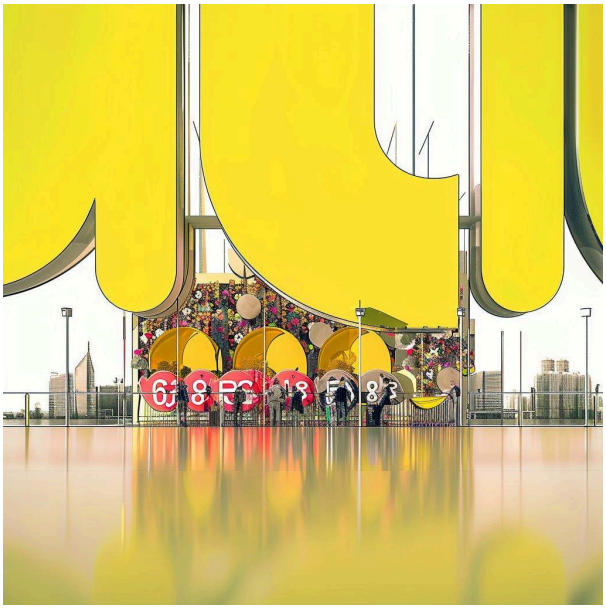


PLATE 10 — BRYANT PARK
four vast letter-columns frame a bouquet of glowing lanterns
a bouquet of paper lanterns
between the letters

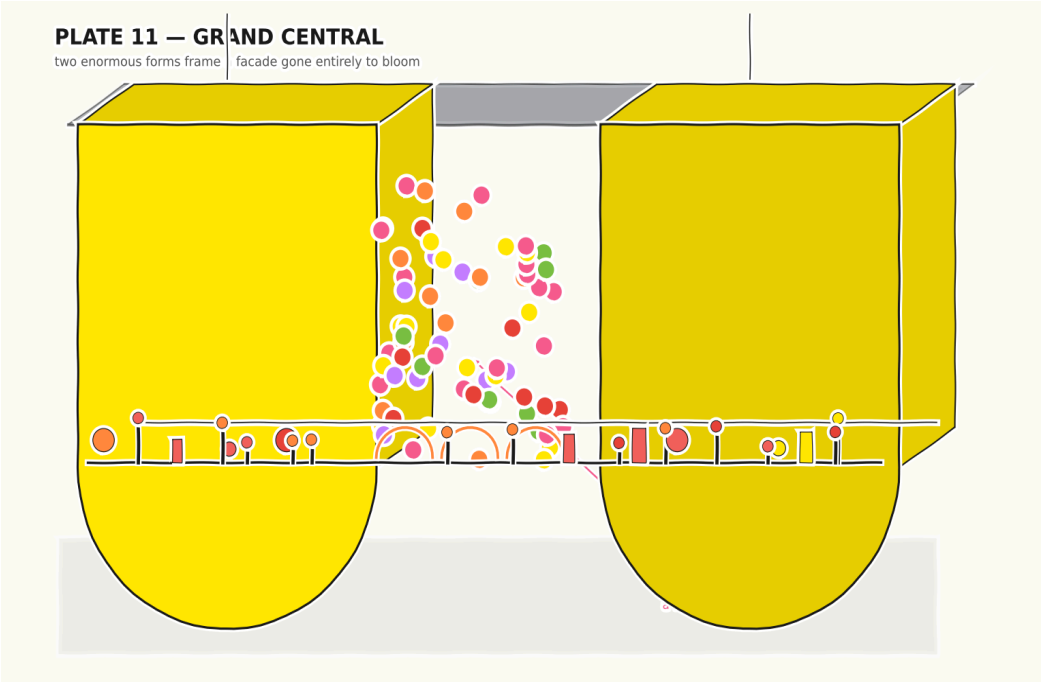
Elevation oblique, Plate 10

Plate 11. The Flower Wall Speaks

Grand Central / Midtown East



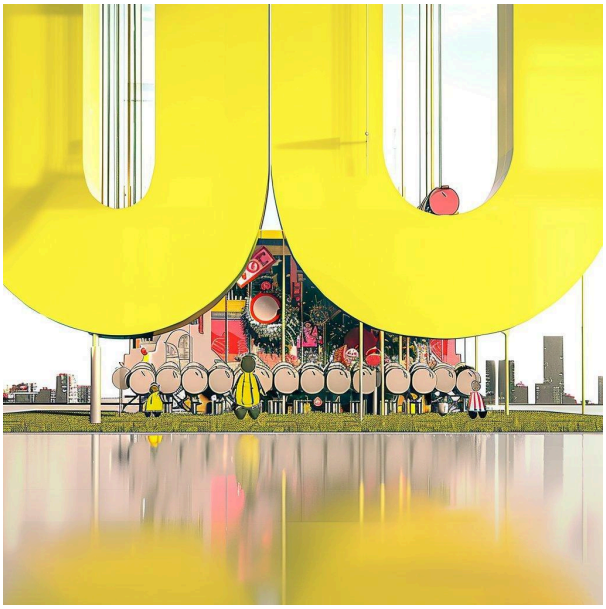
Two enormous forms frame a full facade gone to bloom; golden arches and near-legible red letters below. The generous station that blooms entirely for those who are leaving.



Elevation oblique, Plate 11

Plate 12. The Round Ones Hold the Hem Up

Central Park South



The two largest forms in the apparatus, hems nearly grounded, held aloft by a long line of small identical round figures. No one holds it alone. The green and the city finally see each other.

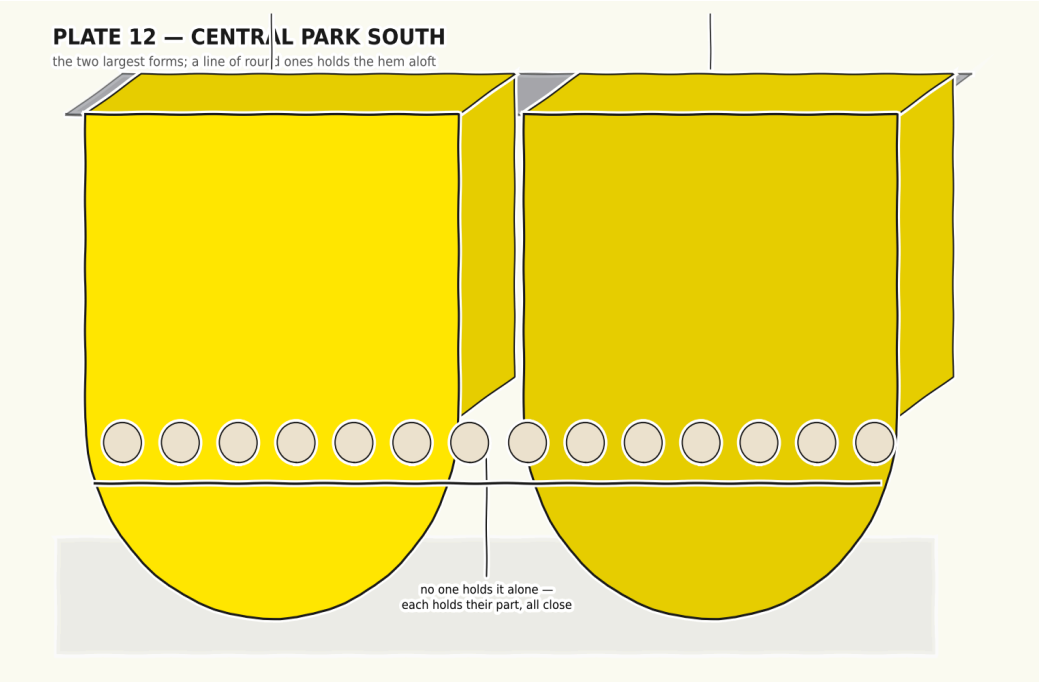
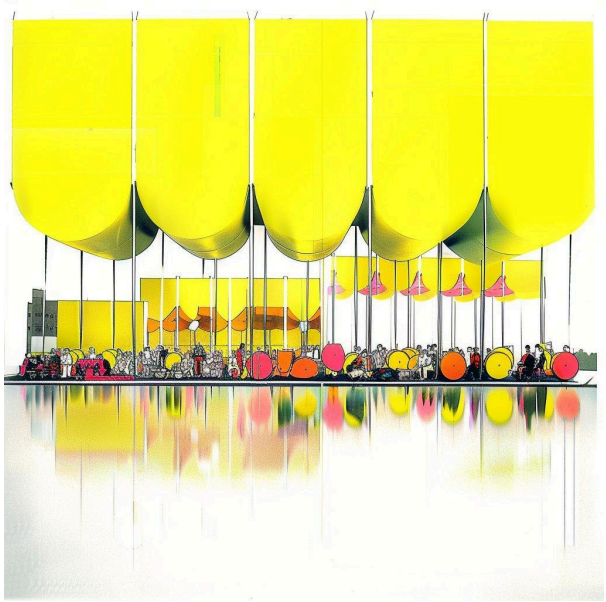


PLATE 12 — CENTRAL PARK SOUTH
the two largest forms; a line of round ones holds the hem aloft
no one holds it alone —
each holds their part, all close

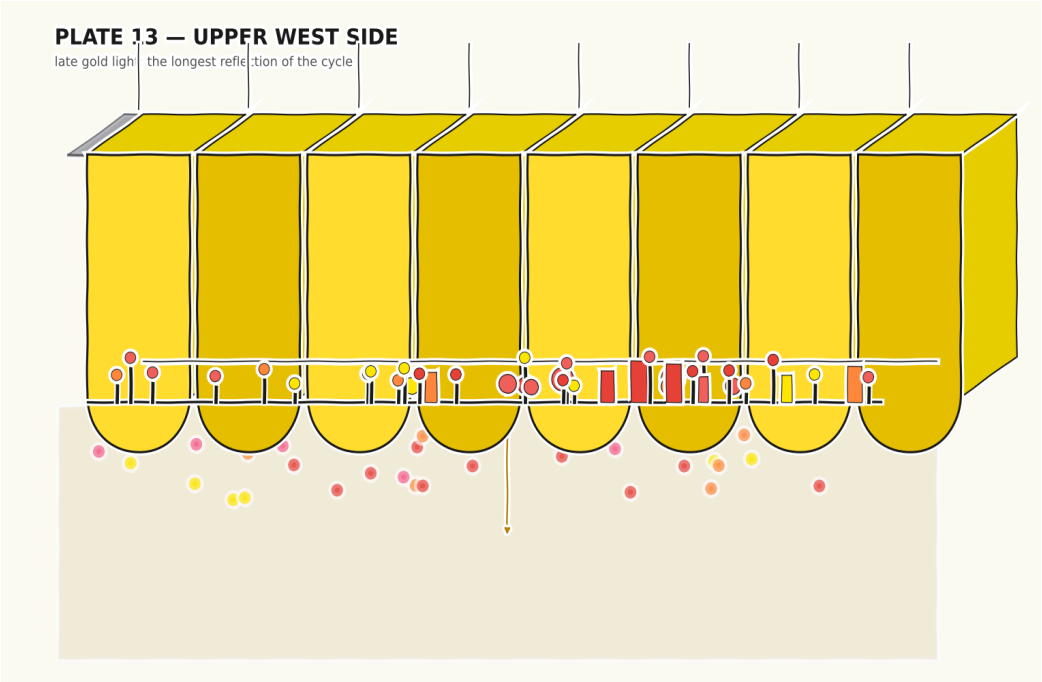
Elevation oblique, Plate 12

Plate 13. The Reflection Learns Its Name

The Upper West Side



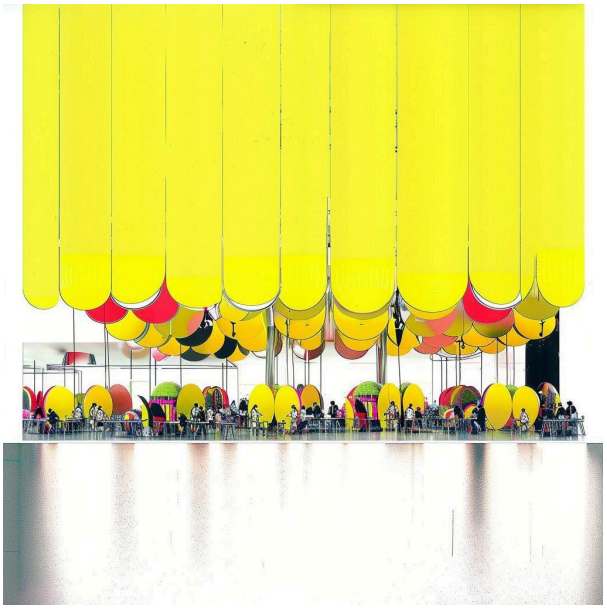
The longest reflection of the cycle in low gold light — the full cast doubled in the mirror-pool. The reflection revealed not as copy but as the city's lasting memory of the day.



Elevation oblique, Plate 13

Plate 14. The Whole Island Sings

Harlem & the Great Lawn



The finale: every panel open at once over the great lawn, every wakened building and cast member gathered, each singing its own scene into one song made of many. The mirror-pool keeps it all, doubled and gold.

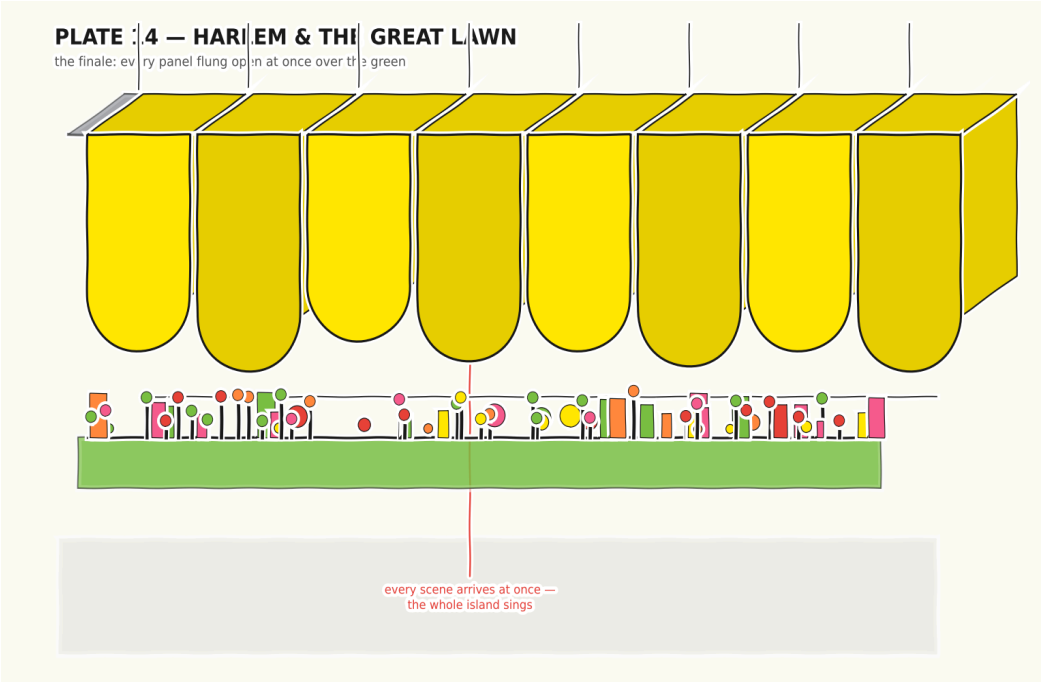
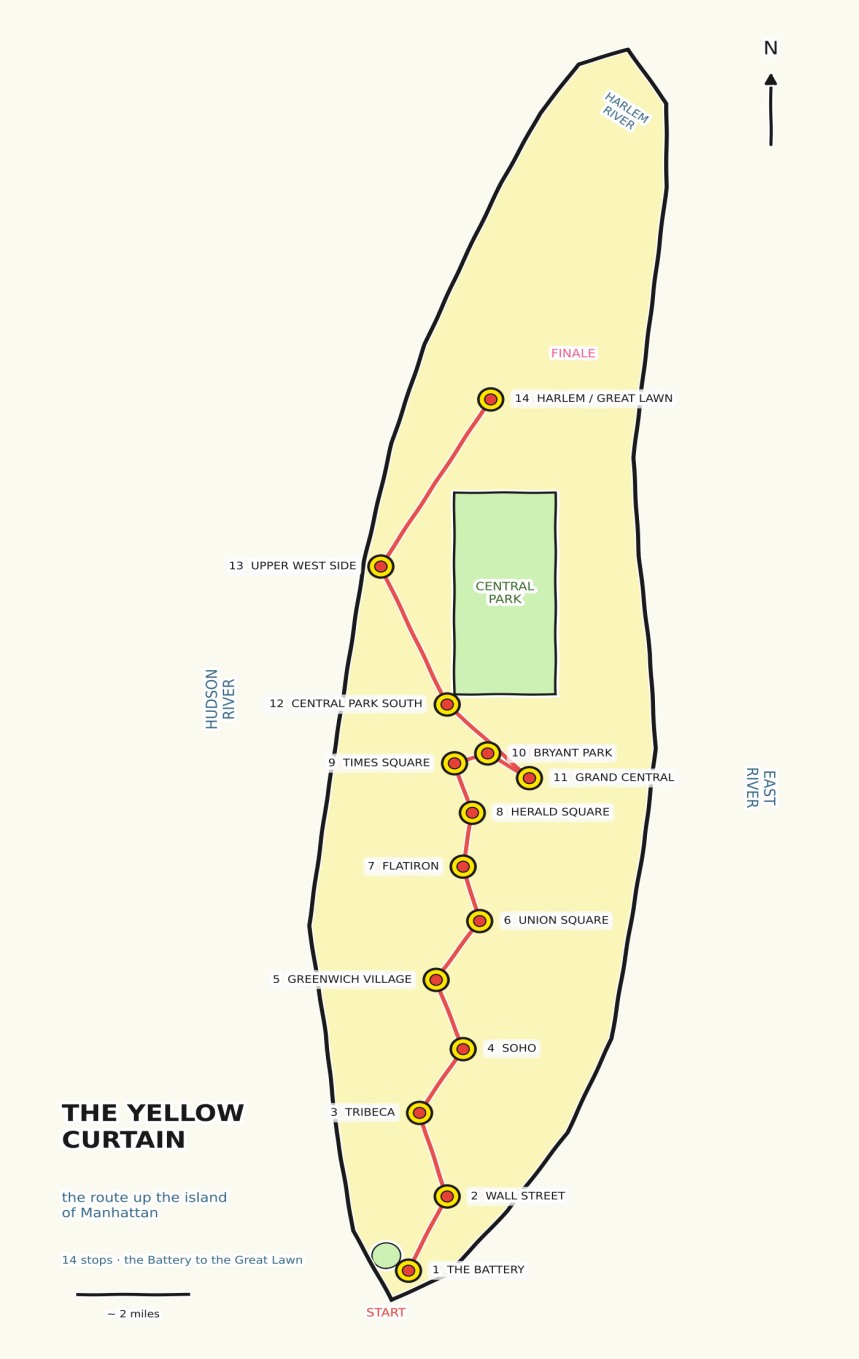


PLATE 14 — HARLEM & THE GREAT LAWN
the finale: every panel flung open at once over the green
every scene arrives at once —
the whole island sings

Elevation oblique, Plate 14

Map of the Island

The Yellow Curtain travels a single track up the spine of Manhattan, pausing at fourteen neighborhoods between the Battery at the island's southern tip and the Great Lawn near its northern end. The map shows the whole island — bounded by the Hudson River to the west, the East River to the east, and the Harlem River to the north — with the fourteen stops marked in their true order of ascent.



The route, south to north, the full length of the island.

Colophon & Credits

- All imagery in this book — every one of the fourteen plates — was conceived, modeled in three dimensions (Rhino 3D), and rendered by Surjan. No artificial intelligence was used to generate, alter, or assist any image in this work. The pictures are entirely Surjan's own.
- The writing was authored by Surjan with the assistance of artificial intelligence: Surjan conceived the story, the voice, the cast, and the meaning, and wrote it in collaboration with an AI that assisted with the labor of the prose. The words are Surjan's, AI-assisted; the images are Surjan's alone.
- The schematic map and the fourteen elevation-oblique diagrams are explanatory illustrations prepared for this edition.
- Surjan is the creator of the context.
- Every individual in this novella is genderqueer and non-binary, as is the author.

◇ ◆ ◇

Look down into the mirror-pool, and find your own face among the cast.